

Christmas in South Bethlehem

∞ An Ethnic Experience ∞



*Brass ornament keepsake of the
American Christmas Tree*

Christmas Trees and Traditions
of South Bethlehem Ethnic Groups

SOUTH BETHLEHEM HISTORICAL SOCIETY



The American Christmas Tree

German immigrants brought the Christmas tree to America in the 1800s.

Prior to the Civil War, President Franklin Pierce was the first to have a Christmas tree in the White House.

Today, American holiday celebrations include many traditions, especially those brought by ethnic groups to South Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.



Christmas in South Bethlehem ~ An Ethnic Experience



Souza

On Christmas Eve in 1947, fourteen year-old Portuguese immigrant, Armino Souza arrived at Union Station with his parents Antonio and Teresa, and his older brother, Antonio, Jr. From the station, they walked through four feet of snow to their home on Buchanan St. in South Bethlehem. In 1987, while a member of the Pennsylvania Governors Heritage Affairs Advisory Commission, Armino headed the first “Portuguese Heritage Week” proclaimed by the state. In the Pennsylvania State Capitol, Armino noticed a collection of Christmas trees on display, decorated by resident ethnic groups from around the State.

In 1991, while he served on the South Bethlehem Historical Society Board of Directors, Armino applied a similar concept of decorating ethnic trees, which became *Christmas in South Bethlehem—An Ethnic Experience*. Through this annual Christmas tree display, ethnic diversity is known and celebrated in South Bethlehem—thanks to Armino Souza.

*“Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays
and a Happy New Year”*

Christmas Trees and Traditions of South Bethlehem Ethnic Groups

African-American Traditions —

The tradition of decorating Christmas trees was adopted by African-Americans based on a practice by 19th century Americans. Trees were decorated with pine cones, walnuts and pecans hung by brightly colored ribbons. Later, glass balls might have adorned the trees, along with a silver star on top—which represented the Christ child.

Presents, or “*Blessings*” were placed under the tree and were most likely precious fruits—like oranges and apples. A big family meal celebrated “*Thanks*,” and would have been prepared and served at midday.

Carpatho-Rusyn Christmas —

In South Bethlehem, Carpatho-Rusyn Christmas traditions centered around the family. Before the traditional Christmas Eve Holy Supper, an evergreen tree was decorated with live candles, apples, and hard candy rolled in white or red tissue paper bound with aluminum foil.

Sometimes *Pysanky*, decorated eggs, sugar cubes or painted walnuts were added. The tree, draped with angel hair, was topped with a symbolic straw Archangel Raphael, who protected the Holy Family.

In preparation for the Christmas Eve supper, straw was placed on the table and a cloth laid over, symbolizing straw in the cave where Jesus was born. A chain was wrapped around the legs of the table, to symbolize family unity and strength, and finally a candle was placed on the table.

Christmas Eve was strictly a day of fast—no meat or dairy products were served in the twelve dishes prepared, which represented the twelve apostles: 1. *Palinka*, wine; 2. Mushroom soup with sauerkraut; 3. Lima beans; 4. Boiled potatoes mixed with onions and oil; 5. *Bobalyki*, baked dough balls served with ground nuts or poppy seeds; 6. Stewed prunes; 7. *Pirohi*, filled dumplings; 8. Herring; 9. *Prosphora*, bread dipped in honey (represents the sweetness of life) and eaten

with a clove of garlic (represents the bitterness of life); 10. Garlic, salt and pepper as seasoning; 11. Nut and poppy seed rolls; 12. *Pagach*, bread and coffee. After supper, families strolled with neighbors and sang carols. At midnight, adults attended the night-time prayer of the church—the Compline Service and the Divine Liturgy.

Meals were prepared earlier in the week because Christmas was a day of total relaxation without any work. When people greeted family and friends, they said to each other—

“Christos Razdajetsja! Slavite Jeho”
(*Christ is born! Glorify Him*)

Christmas in England —

In England during December, carolers sang from one house to another, and Handel’s *Messiah* could be heard in nearly every church and chapel. At home, Christmas cake and the pudding had been “ripening” for several weeks, and great quantities of mince pies were made. Homes were decorated with holly, ivy and mistletoe. On Christmas Eve, children hung stockings at the foot of the bed for “Father Christmas” to fill.

Christmas trees were virtually unknown before 1848, when Queen Victoria’s homesick German husband, Prince Albert set up a tree in Windsor Castle. The tree—laden with gilded fruits and nuts, rich candies in silver baskets, an array of toys and dozens of flickering candles—became popular in England. During the 1880s, reusable glass balls and cardboard ornaments replaced most edible decorations.

Popular in Paris, paper rolls of sugared almonds found no welcome in London, even when riddles were tucked inside . . . that is, until “snappers” were added and changed them to “Christmas crackers.” Inside the crackers, trinkets and paper hats replaced candy and are popular even today.

Christmas dinner was served at midday. The pudding was brought to the table ablaze with brandy and eaten warily, for it contained symbolic silver trinkets, which predicted events of the coming year. Then at 5 p.m. during High Tea, fruitcake was served, topped with marzipan and royal icing, and girdled with a fringed paper “frill” as a centerpiece. Trifle, mince pies and a chocolate log were other dessert favorites.

Afterwards, the “Christmas crackers” were pulled by everyone around the table; paper hats inside the crackers were worn and jokes, “mottoes” and toys were gleefully shared. Dec. 26th was the secular holiday, “Boxing Day.” Today, no one goes about begging for coins to fill an alms or tip box, however, people do go to soccer matches or to the “Pantomime”—a dramatization of

fairy-tales, interspersed with vaudeville acts.

The full Twelve Days of Christmas are no longer observed, although it is said that each mince pie eaten during this period ensures a day of happiness in the New Year. Traditionally, anyone who does not take down their Christmas decorations by Twelfth Night, Jan. 6th, invites bad luck.

“Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year”

Christmas in Germany —

Many of the world’s cherished Christmas traditions have their origin in Germany. It has been determined that the Christmas tree had its birth in Germany in the early 1600s, when a fir tree was brought inside and decorated. Among the early decorations were small white candles, which symbolized Christ as the *“Light of the World,”* apples, which remind us of the Fall of Man, and pine cones, cookies and walnuts.

Cookies symbolize the sweetness of Redemption; walnuts were hand-decorated at home before commercial ornaments were developed. The tree was always capped with a straw star or an angel, which symbolized the Annunciation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary.

Trimming the tree was part of the Christmas Eve tradition—after the tree was erected, rarely was it decorated beforehand. In later years, colorful blown-glass baubles, ornate paper cutouts, gingerbread cookies and strips of tinfoil adorned the tree. Glass-blown ornaments replaced many of the hand-made ornaments and each has its own significance: the glass mushroom represented good luck—grape ornaments symbolized friendship; glass coffee pots symbolized hospitality.

The pickle ornament was considered one of the most special decorations by German families. It was the last ornament hung on the tree by parents, who cleverly hid it in the boughs. When children were allowed to view the tree, a gleeful search for the pickle ornament ensued—the child who found it first would receive an extra little gift for having been most observant.

Baking cookies and cakes, shopping the markets during the Christmas holiday, decorating the fir tree, hanging the Advent wreath and dozens of other practices of family participation have made the German Christmas an extraordinary pageant. Many of these practices have been adopted by other nations throughout the world to this day.

“Fröhliche Weihnachten” (Merry Christmas)

Christmas in Greece —

The Christmas season in Greece was observed as a religious festival and many ancient customs were linked to the birth of Christ. The journey to Bethlehem was symbolically depicted in the forty-day Advent fasting period before Christmas.

Orthodox Christians were called upon to prepare themselves for the Baby Jesus to be born in the manger of their hearts. As contemporary *Magi*, Orthodox Christians were guided by the star of love and virtue—to support and assist institutions that cared for the unfortunate in orphanages, prisons, old age homes, families in need, the injured and the sick.

At dawn on Christmas Eve in Greece, children went from house to house singing the *Kalanda*, carols. Boys in the group provided rhythmical accompaniment on small metal triangles and tiny clay drums. Carols presented the story of the newborn King. Elaborate preparations were made for the Christmas meal—every household baked a *Christopsomo*, Christ bread, which was decorated with frosted ornaments and usually represented some aspect of the family occupation.

At 5 a.m., everyone attended two church services held on Christmas Day: *Orthros*, Matins and *Eucharist*, Divine Thanksgiving. After church, the family gathered together to enjoy their Christmas meal—on the table, a Christmas loaf and a pot of honey, with dried fruits, walnuts, hazelnuts and almonds arranged around it. The head of the house led the family in prayer and a traditional Christmas hymn—and wished all *Chronia Polla*, a long life, while a slice of bread was cut for each family member. Honey was eaten to symbolize the sweetness of the New Life, inaugurated by the coming of Christ.

Afterwards, a variety of foods were served according to each region. During the twelve-day period from Christmas to the Epiphany, Orthodox Christians in Greece exchanged gifts with relatives, friends and acquaintances in appreciation for the great Gift of Christ Incarnate for our Salvation.

Καλά Χριστούγεννα “*Kala Christougenna*” (*Merry Christmas*)

Christmas in Hungary —

When South Bethlehem Hungarians recalled Christmas past in their native Hungary, they remembered how the holiday festivities were celebrated by all family members.

Candles were placed in the windows as a symbolic greeting to those absent from home, and in memory of deceased family members. As they sang and strolled about the village, carolers carried a huge illuminated star, and perhaps

a Nativity scene. “Nativity Plays” were very popular and could be found in almost every village.

The Christmas tree played a very important part in the celebration of Christmas . . . in the village square, as in the home, evergreen trees were decorated with ornaments, which originated from each of their regions.

Edibles used for tree decorations included metallic foil-wrapped Christmas candies, cookies, apples and decorated whole walnuts. Other ornaments included wax candles and hand-crafted items. At home, a great deal of time was spent preparing foods of all kinds for the Christmas meal and the table was set with utmost attention.

Christmas Eve was an occasion of family activity. Before the evening meal, the family gathered around the Christmas tree—after a short prayer, gifts were placed near the tree. When the first star appeared in the sky, the evening meal was served.

After the meal was finished, families attended church services together and recalled the birth of Jesus Christ. Once they returned home, each member of the family eagerly opened their Christmas gifts.

“Boldog Karácsony” (Merry Christmas)

Christmas in Ireland —

Advent was a very important period in preparation for Christmas in Ireland. Every Irish church had four candles placed on a stand—one candle lighted for each Sunday in Advent, all four lighted on the fourth Sunday of Advent.

The Irish home was fully decorated by Christmas Eve. Holly and ivy were brought in from the woods and placed throughout the house. Sprigs of mistletoe were hung above the doorways and small mangers were often made by members of the family.

No meat was eaten on Christmas Eve. In years past, church bells tolled the devil’s funeral. According to legend, the birth of Christ was the demise of the devil. Midnight services were the most beloved of the liturgical celebrations.

A lighted candle was placed in every window—a sign of welcome for Mary and Joseph, who wandered the streets of Bethlehem for lodgings in ancient times. Over the centuries, the Irish believed that the Holy Family walked the roads of Ireland every Christmas Eve. Today, candles welcome those who travel Ireland’s roads on Christmas Day:

*On Christmas Eve, a candlelight
To shine abroad through Christmas night*

*That those who pass may see it glow,
And walk with Christ an hour or so.*

—*Author unknown*

Christmas Day was a day of celebration—when families came together for the finest meal of the year. Late in the afternoon, the traditional dinner featured spiced beef, mince pies, plum pudding and soda bread. The Christmas cake, a very rich fruit cake, was served last with the traditional tea. The Irish Christmas tree was decorated in true Irish style by the hands of the family—and their wish to you: *Peace in the New Year, and Love always in your Hearts.*

“Nollaig Shona Dhuit” (Merry Christmas to You)

Christmas in Italy —

In South Bethlehem, Italian parishioners of Our Lady of Pompeii Church remembered Christmas in their native Italy, when the Church congregation and civil authorities celebrated the holiday. At Christmas, Italians traveled home to attend spiritual and family celebrations.

The spiritual celebration centered around the birth of the Infant Jesus. Parents and their children participated in setting up the Nativity scene which included figures of the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, the Magi, shepherds and the animals.

Il Presepe, the Christmas Crib, depicted the birth of the Christ-child in a manger, a tradition attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi in the village of Greccio in 1223. The Baby Jesus was placed in the crib on until Christmas Eve.

Preparations for the feast made far in advance were centered around the family dinner table. At the traditional Christmas Eve supper, a meatless meal was served which consisted of eel, *baccala*, dried cod, or any variety of fish prepared in seven different dishes—representation of the Seven Sacraments.

On Christmas Day, the family attended Mass celebrated in the Christmas Liturgy. By the afternoon, the Christmas dinner served was an elaborate feast for the senses: antipasto followed by soup, pasta, an entree and a salad. Depending upon the region in Italy, the entree may have been *prosciutto*, dry-cured ham, a roasted capon, or *bracirole*, rolled stuffed beef in tomato sauce.

After dinner, desserts featured: *biscotti*, twice-baked biscuits; *amaretti*, macaroons; *gelati*, ice cream; *struffoli*, little fried dough balls drizzled with honey and sprinkled with candy “confetti,” *cannoli*, crisp tubes of pastry filled with sweetened ricotta cheese; *pizzelles*, waffle cookies; figs and chestnuts.

Liqueurs included Amaretto, Anisette, Galliano, Sambuca and Strega—followed by espresso or cappuccino. The family dinner was always in view of the Crib, which symbolized sharing their meal with Christ.

An Italian Christmas tradition dating back to the thirteenth century, was

based on the legend, *La Befana*—an old woman too busy to join the Three Wise Men with her gifts for the Christ Child. Unable to find them the next day, the old woman wandered forever, leaving her gifts for the children of Italy on Ephiphany Eve (Jan. 5). *La Befana's* good intentions reaffirm the bond between family and descendants through the exchange of gifts.

“Buon Natale” (Merry Christmas)

Latino Christmas Traditions —

Latino newcomers to South Bethlehem celebrated Christmas like many other Spanish-speaking people throughout the world and featured a combination of different events: religious ceremonies, traditional music and festivals in a long, happy holiday.

Every morning at 5:30, *Misa de Aguinaldo*, the traditional Latino High Mass was celebrated. with popular Christmas music and songs performed during nine consecutive days—from Dec. 16 to *Nochebuena*, Christmas Eve. At midnight on Christmas Eve, *Misa de Gallo*, or the Rooster Mass began the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child; on Dec. 25th, Christmas Day, *Navidad*, the birth of Christ, was a celebration of food, music and gifts.

December 28th, *Día de los Inocentes*, Day of Holy Innocents, commemorated Herod's massacre of first-born infant boys. Depending upon their locale, this festival featured participants dressed with masks and costumes.

In anticipation of *Despedida de Año*, New Years Eve, many waited until midnight for *Año Nuevo*, the New Year, when at that solemn moment, someone would give *El Brindis del Bohemio*, the Bohemian Toast, a poem recited when the old year had gone and the New Year had arrived on Jan. 1st.

During *Año Nuevo*, families who visited relatives and friends, wished them good fortune in the New Year. An important day of the season was Jan. 6th, *Día de los Tres Reyes Magos*, Day of the Three Wise Kings, when presents were received in celebration of the Wise King's gifts to Jesus. During the day, children gathered grass and placed it in a box underneath their beds—a tradition that signified food for the Three Kings' camels.

At the conclusion of the holiday, *Octavitas*, the eight-day celebration in honor of the Three Wise Kings. Latinos and Spanish-speaking ethnic groups from Mexico, Puerto Rico and other regions who lived in South Bethlehem, celebrated these Christmas traditions.

“Muchas Felicidades En La Navidad”

(Merry Christmas and a Prosperous New Year)

Lithuanian Christmas —

Lithuanian immigrants in South Bethlehem believed that Christmas, *Kaledos*, was a holiday of hope and joy. During the four weeks of Advent, contemplation and fasting ended on Christmas Eve. In anticipation of the holiday, their homes were immaculately cleaned. Close to Christmas Day, the tantalizing aroma of holiday foods filled the house.

The most important event centered around *Kucios*, the Christmas Eve Supper. Family members were seated at the table according to age. The table was set in a very special manner, a reminder that the Christ Child was born in a manger. In the center of the table was a crucifix and a plate of *Plotkeles*, blessed Christmas wafers.

After prayers of thanksgiving and hope for family prospects, the Christmas Eve meal consisted of twelve meatless dishes, served to commemorate the Twelve Apostles. An exciting event that followed *Kucios*, was the presentation of the Christmas tree . . . an unusual tree, traditionally without tinsel, glitter, blinking multi-colored lights or decorations often seen on other Christmas trees. A reflection of their agricultural heritage, Lithuanian's used natural materials for Christmas tree ornaments, which they fashioned from organic, common-place materials—straw, wood, eggshells, nutshells, plant pods or crocheted items. These hand-crafted ornaments often required hours of painstaking work and ingenuity.

Unlike other European ethnic groups, Lithuania was among the last to be Christianized.

Linksmų Kalėdų ir Iaimingų Naujųjų Metų
(*Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year*)

The Moravian Christmas Tree —

The first candlelit Christmas tree was the pyramid tree. This artificial tree was made by wrapping evergreen boughs around a wooden, pyramid-shaped frame and decorated with sweets and candles. Candlelit pyramid trees became popular in Europe in the mid-1600s and were often placed in the same room with the candleless *Chrisbaum*.*

Pyramid trees were common Christmas decorations in Saxony, where the Moravians had been offered refuge on the estate of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf in 1722. When they celebrated Christmas in the United States in 1747, the Moravian community in Bethlehem, PA, gathered around a pyramid tree. Their pyramid was the first documented use of Christmas trees in America.

The tree was decorated with apples and hymn verses to appeal to children. Verses written on paper were placed on the tree in German script.

* *Note*— The first description of a decorated tree was written in a 1605 diary by a person traveling through the Germanic territory of Alsace, now part of France. The *Christbaum*, or Christ tree, was decorated with paper roses, to symbolize the Virgin Mary; flat wheat wafers, to represent the Communion host; apples, to represent Adam and Eve's fall from grace; and gilded candies.

Christbaums were common in German homes throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. German immigrants introduced the *Christbaum* to the United States during the colonial period.

Christ is born! Peace and Joy

(Verses translated from the German to English)

Mexican Christmas Traditions —

Perhaps the most delightful and unique aspect of Mexican Christmas tradition begins on Dec. 16th up to Christmas Eve. *Las Posadas*, is a dramatization of Joseph and Mary in search of lodgings from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Each night of the *Posada*, children carried candles in a procession, while they sang the Litany of the Virgin, along with two children who carried a pine-decorated platform upon which was a replica of Joseph with Mary seated on a burro. They approached a house, woke the owner and begged lodgings for Mary. Those within the house threatened the procession, when the owner suddenly learned who Mary and Joseph were and welcomed the lodgers. All knelt around the manger scene, *Nacimiento*, and offered songs of welcome and prayer.

During this time of traditional dancing and refreshments, the *Pinata*—a brightly decorated paper container or pottery filled with candy and toys—was hung above the heads of blindfolded children. Each child struck the *Pinata* with a stick until it broke open and the contents fell to the floor. On Christmas Eve, children dressed as shepherds, gathered around the manger and sang the lullaby, *El Rorro*, Babe in Arms.

At midnight, the birth of Christ was announced with fireworks, bells and whistles. After they attend *Missa de Gallo*, the Mass of the Rooster, families returned home for a enormous dinner of traditional Mexican food: *tamales*, rice; *rellenos*, chili pepper stuffed with meat; *atole*, a sweet drink of corn meal, sugar, cinnamon and vanilla and *menudo*, a traditional soup more sobering than coffee.

Christmas Day in Mexico was celebrated American-style—with a Christ-

mas tree and Santa Claus. On Jan. 6th, Three Kings Day commemorated the visit of Three Wise Men, thought to be magicians, but really astronomers, who followed the star to the Christ Child. At the manger, they offered Him gifts of Frankincense, an aromatic resin—Gold, a precious metal and—Myrrh, a medicine.

*“Feliz Navidad y Próspero Año”
(Happy Christmas and a Happy New Year)*

Christmas in Poland —

Celebrating a Polish Christmas in South Bethlehem was always simple. In Polish tradition, the first star seen in the sky on Christmas Eve indicated the time for Christmas festivities to begin.

The family was seated at the table for *Wigilia*, the vigil dinner and *Oplatek*, bread of love. The father or eldest family member broke the *Oplatek* in half and gave it to the mother. Each member of the family broke a small part of each others piece, and after an embrace, wished one another long life, health and happiness. The white, almost transparent communion wafer symbolized love, friendship and forgiveness.

Family members did not approach the table on Christmas Eve without forgiving and forgetting, and wished everyone well in a wholehearted manner. The *Oplatek* was sent to family members who could not be present at the *Wigilia*.

It was customary to set an extra place at the table, ready and waiting for any lonely traveler who might knock on the door—or for any family members from great distances, that they may spiritually join in the meal.

After dinner, Polish Christmas carols, *Koledy*, were sung and gifts were given. Later, the family attended Midnight Mass, the *Pasterka* or Shepherd’s Watch. Christmas Day was very peaceful. People rested or visited relatives and friends. Not much cooking was done—meals were served cold or reheated. On the second day of Christmas, a “Hunter’s Stew” was prepared from sausage and leftover meats.

In Poland, Christmas was celebrated from Dec. 25th to, *Swieta Trzech Króli*, the Feast of the Epiphany, Jan. 6th. During this time, the faithful received an envelope which contained gold leaf, incense and juniper berries—symbolic gifts the Three Kings had given to the Infant Jesus. Parties were held in churches throughout January and *Koledy* were sung until Candlemas Day, Feb. 2nd.

*“Wesołych Świąt Bożego Narodzenia”
(Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year)*

Christmas in Portugal —

Portuguese immigrants, who settled in South Bethlehem practiced Christmas traditions similar to those of their native land. Because of the many ethnic groups in Portugal's history, Christmas was celebrated a little differently in each province. After baking on Christmas Eve, parents took their younger children into the woods in search of an evergreen tree and moss for the Nativity scene.

When the family returned home, all helped to decorate the tree with cork, wood or clay toys, dolls, ribbons, dry flowers, baskets, bells, fruits and wax candles. These items placed beneath the tree were an important aspect of the Portuguese Christmas—the Nativity creche portrayed the birthplace of Christ.

The table was covered with a special hand-loomed linen tablecloth. Older daughters helped their mother prepare Christmas Eve supper—meatless dishes served featured *Caldo Verde*, a vegetable soup made with olive oil and salted dried codfish soaked, boiled and prepared with kale, potatoes, onions, turnips and hard boiled eggs. After supper, children played card games, engaged in story-telling or sang Christmas carols. At midnight, the family attended church for the *Missa do Galo*, or the Rooster Mass, derived from legend that a rooster crowed at midnight when Christ was born.

Before going to bed on Christmas Eve, children placed shoes by the fireplace with hope that the Infant Jesus would fill their shoes with presents, toys, money, dried fruits and nuts.

At home on Christmas Day, the whole family was seated at the dinner table and enjoyed a feast of traditional Portuguese foods—chicken, pork and beef, or turkey and lamb—with *Bolo Rei*, a special Christmas bread. Following dinner, family members cheerfully opened their gifts. During the Christmas holiday, Portuguese families visited one another and continued festivities until Jan. 6th, the traditional Arrival of the Magi.

"Feliz Natal" (Merry Christmas)

Christmas in Russia —

Immigrants of the Russian Orthodox faith, who came to South Bethlehem brought Christmas celebrations steeped in Russian and Slavic folk traditions. The religious preparation began on Nov. 28th, with a forty-day fasting period which ended on Jan. 6th. Those who chose to fast during this period did not consume meat, eggs, milk, cheese or butter. The fast was relaxed on Dec. 19th, in observance of the Feast of St. Nicholas, when children traditionally received small presents from the saint.

On Christmas Eve, the entire family attended the *Vespers* and *Matins* service at church. Once back home, tea was served and an evergreen tree was lighted for the first time. The Christmas tree was unknown in Russia until after 1699, when Czar Peter the Great decreed that all Russians were to have a Christmas tree at home for this holiday. Christmas trees became a tradition over the years in Russian villages by the mid 19th century, when tree decorations included cookies, gilded nuts, small animal figures and dolls. Later, Russian craftsmen produced wooden and birch bark ornaments.

Christmas Day began with attendance at church, followed by the Christmas feast—the most lavish meal of the year, which featured a roast suckling pig or a goose. The period of Russian Christmas, from Jan. 7th to Epiphany, Jan. 19th, was known as *Syatki*, when the ancient Slavic custom of mummary was practiced. Fortune-telling was popular among young women who practiced it almost any evening during *Syatki*, especially on New Year’s Eve and at Epiphany, to predict when and whom they would marry.

During the years of Soviet rule after the Russian Revolution, all aspects of Christmas customs were abolished. St. Nicholas was replaced by *Ded Moroz*, Grandfather Frost, and his helper, *Snegwrochka*, the Snow Maiden. The Christmas tree was replaced with the New Year’s tree because New Year’s Day was the main Soviet holiday. With the fall of Communism at the end of the twentieth century, Christmas was restored and has become one of the major holidays of the Russian year.

“Веселого Рождества и счастливого Нового года”
(*Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year*)

Christmas in Slovakia —

In Slovak homes around South Bethlehem, the appearance of the first star in the heavens in Advent signaled the traditional beginning celebrations of Christ’s birth. In preparation for this most holy of holidays, families cleaned the house, baked and planned Christmas celebrations.

Prominent in the home was the Christmas tree—introduced from Germany in the late 18th century, a similar custom dating from the pagan era. This practice included evergreen branches taken into the home during the winter solstice and symbolized the germination of new life. Children were enraptured with the gaily bedecked tree, glittering hand-made ornaments and wax candles, later replaced by electric lights. From its green branches hung gilded nuts, figs, chestnuts, berries, apples, birds and decorated gingerbread men.

On Christmas Eve, fish was served at suppertime. Dinner on Christmas Day varied between Slovak regions and families. Many households served *Kapust-*

nica, a thick cabbage soup with sausage, meat, dried mushrooms and cream, while others enjoyed baked ham or roast goose, potato salad, pirohy dumplings and vegetables. Popular desserts at Christmas time included *Kolacky*, nut rolls made with poppy seeds and walnuts or apricot, walnut tortes and apple strudel. Some people made more than 10 different types of cookies, which were given to visitors over the Christmas holiday. After dinner, the streets became alive with guests and carolers, who stopped at each household to sing and proclaim the birth of Christ. As midnight approached, the streets were silent and empty as entire families attended midnight Mass.

“Veselé Vianoce a Šťastný Nový Rok”
(Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year)

Slovenian and Windish Christmas Traditions —

Windish people emigrated to Bethlehem from the Prekmurje area of Slovenia, formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On Christmas Eve, Windish families fasted during the day. In the early afternoon, the children accompanied their father outdoors to choose and cut down an evergreen tree. When they returned, the family ate a light meal and decorated the tree afterwards.

Since most families could not afford expensive decorations, the ornaments consisted of wrapped candies and nuts, cookies, oranges, apples, candles and a few glass ornaments. All edible ornaments became treats, which were consumed after the tree was dismantled. Around seven that evening, the family visited the homes of their relatives and friends.

At midnight, families attended church, then returned home and put out the *Jásli*, or Creche figures. No gifts were exchanged at Christmas time—that took place on St. Nicholas’ Day, celebrated on Dec. 6th.

“Vesele Božične Praznike In Srečno Novo Leto”
(Merry Christmas Holidays and Happy New Year)

A Ukrainian Christmas —

In the Ukrainian Church, the coming of Christ, “the Light,” is a theme that dominates the whole of the Ukrainian liturgical cycle. *Kolyady*, Christmas carols, consist of themes on the mysterious birth of Jesus and the stories of Christmas—however, none is sung before Christmas Eve, Dec. 24th.

Pylypiivka was the period of fasting in preparation for the coming Feasts of the Nativity of Christ and Theophany of the Lord, Epiphany. The holy day of St. Nicholas Eve, Dec. 5th, is primarily for the children. Following the *Vesper* ser-

vice, families returned home and the children received small gifts: sweet treats, nuts and fruits under their pillows—and a bunch of twigs—a symbol of penance to remind the children that the Christmas preparation continued.

On Christmas Eve, *Sviatyy Vechir*, the Holy Supper, consisted of a twelve-course meatless meal: Fish; *Borshch* with *Vooshka*, a stromboli filled with mushrooms; two or three sorts of *Holubci*, stuffed cabbage; three sorts of *Verenyky*, pierogi, mushroom sauce, dried fruit; *Kutia*, cooked wheat grain, poppy seeds and honey with nuts and raisins; honeybread, nuts and apples.

During the Christmas season, a bunch of wheat—the symbol of ancestors—was placed in the corner of the room; it represented the bond between living and deceased members of the family in the Birthday celebration of the Redeemer.

Bread, the most significant and sacred food, symbolized the Infant Jesus. A braided oblong loaf of bread was placed on the supper table as a centerpiece, along with a lighted candle on each side. Bits of straw or hay were placed under the tablecloth.

Three braided breads symbolized the Most Holy Trinity, or the three major winter holy days: Christmas, the Nativity of Christ on Dec. 25th, Circumcision/ St. Basil the Great on Jan. 1st, and Theophany of Our Lord, also Epiphany on Jan. 6th—the last major holy day before the Great Lenten season.

“Khrystos Rodyosya” (Christ is born)



“Christmas in South Bethlehem: An Ethnic Experience” is presented by South Bethlehem Historical Society in cooperation with churches, ethnic groups and sponsoring organizations. Special thanks to SBHS member, Frank Podleiszek for leading the tree-lighting carol sing along, and to David Urban and his staff at Comfort Suites, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.