

# Russian Christmas Recalled

By HELEN PRICE STACY

The child with the dark hair and eyes held in her hand a length of gold cord. She dipped it into a pot of glue, then attached it to a large walnut that had been covered with gilt and placed the walnut aside with others to await that moment when the children could go into the room that held the Christmas tree.

From the window she looked out on a world familiarly white. Snow, deep and cold, lay on the ground and the flakes continued to fall. Through the veil she could see into the distance where lights from windows of log houses made gold paths across the snow. She trembled from excitement, for that wondrous day soon would be here. She looked on the wall at a painting of Christ, then with childish faith glanced toward the room that would hold many gifts on Christmas Eve.

The scene might have been a settlement deep in the Kentucky mountains. . . but the child looked from the window of a great and elegant house in St. Petersburg. . . Russia.

"When we were children we didn't have too many home entertainments; thus our parents had the task of keeping us busy in the evening when homework was done." Mrs. Marguerite Weber, sitting in her Pike County, Ky., home was remembering a Christmas of the past when she was happy in St. Petersburg, a name she continues to use for the city now called Leningrad.

Mrs. Weber, who recently retired from the faculty at Pikeville College, was unaware on that Christmas in

**Marguerite Weber was unaware that Christmas in 1917 that she and her family would be caught in the Russian Revolution nor did she dream she would be separated from her family, obtain an underground passport and escape from her homeland . . . eventually making her way to the hills of Eastern Kentucky.**

1917 that she and her family would be caught in the Russian Revolution nor did she dream she would be separated from her loved ones, obtain an underground passport and escape from her homeland across frozen Siberia.

Marguerite's father was director of post and telegraph in St. Petersburg, and her mother was governess in the palace of the Grand Duke Constantine. After the Grand Duke's children were past the age for a governess, her mother then taught foreign languages at Smolney Institute, an exclusive school for girls of noble birth founded in 1764 by Catherine the Great.

But childhood days in St. Petersburg that preceded the Revolution (there also was a 1905 revolt) were days of faithful attendance and worship in the Greek Orthodox Church and many homes used ikons of Christ for worship.

"From the materials supplied us we made decorations for the large tree. We created yards and yards of chain, little angels with fluffy wings, houses with roofs covered in heavy snow, tiny boxes with a surprise inside and funny old Santas known to Russian children as *G r a n d f a t h e r* Frost. We attached gold or silver thread to the walnuts and later would hang them to

the lower branches of the tree. We were permitted to eat some of the walnuts, and this made our task even more enjoyable.

"We never disposed of the shell when we were able to crack the nut into halves. We later filled each half with beeswax, and stuck a tiny candle in the wax for a ship mast and also a sail, and thus we had a miniature boat. During the holiday season we would navigate these boats in a basin filled with water, in a dark room with only light from the tiny candles. Well, it was like in a fairy tale, and we dreamed all sorts of fantasies watching the glittering of the little flames upon the surface of the water.

"In my childhood the Christmas decorations were done at home as there were only a few things we could buy in a store. These generally were kept in boxes and never disposed of.

"Finally Christmas Eve arrived. A great fir tree was dragged in the drawing room and Peter, the handy man, adjusted a cross to the bottom and with great effort raised the large tree till he star at the top touched the ceiling.

"A cool and perfumed air was coming from the tree, its

branches defrosting in the warm room until they spread and loosened the aroma filling the entire house.

"We children then were allowed to decorate the tree's lower branches. Cases of apples from the Crimea were brought in and we attached them to the tree with gold and silver twine, mixing these with gilded nuts and Christmas cookies. When the entire bottom of the tree was glistening with decorations and small candles, Mother told us to leave the room and not enter until we were called.

"When the first star sparkled on the dark firmament the doors of the drawing room were slowly opened and before our eyes the Christmas tree stood in its full splendor. It was glittering with a multitude of candles the light of which was caught by the many colored glass balls. The tree seems to be on fire and the warm air which emanated from it was scented with the perfume of tangerines, apples and honey cookies. Under the tree arranged in a disorderly heap were gifts wrapped in gay paper."

A childhood Christmas in Russia remembered . . . customs that do not differ greatly from those in America today . . . but in Soviet Russia, there is a difference. Christmas as a holiday has been abolished and a secular New Year is celebrated.

But to a Pike Countian by adoption, who fled Communism in 1919 and lives quietly with her husband Arkady Weber at Pikeville, Christmases are among the pleasant memories that preceded her long flight to freedom.

*Helen Price remembered repeating this, to Junepe Log Cabins!!!*