

Christmas Eve at a World War II Refugee Camp

By: Elizabeth Ann Berton-Reilly

In 2014, I interviewed Johanna Keenan, an Estonian American woman of seventy some years who follows Estonian Old Ways that pre-date Christian traditions. Meeting and getting to know Keenan gave me an opportunity to learn about an ancient European tradition and associated foodways.

One of Keenan's most vivid memories of Christmas (Yule, or *yõulu* in Estonian) dates from when she, with her mother and three siblings, were living in a refugee camp known as the Pond Barracks in Amberg, Germany. By the end of World War II there were several million refugees from all of Europe living in refugee camps that the Allies established in Germany to house people displaced due to the ravages of war. The camps were set up largely to give the refugees a place to live until relocation. Although for the most part the Allied camps were humane places providing food and shelter, the conditions were not ideal. These were makeshift shelters created mostly from military bases (Kirchhof 2006).

Johanna and the rest of her family lived in one of these camps from August 1945 to May 1950.; Keenan's father was missing in action. Despite the sadness and despair she faced, there was hope.

Keenan recalled a particular Christmas Eve spent in the camps when she was six. Although it was Yule Eve, a time when the Yule Grandfather would visit children and give them gifts after the children performed for him, Keenan's mother explained to her and her siblings that this year he would not show up because they were poor. Her mother then suggested that the children could perform for one another instead



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(Keenan 2014). Below is Keenan's written account of that special Christmas Eve, just one of many unpublished stories and poems about her life both in the camps and in the United States that she has written throughout the years (Keenan 2015):

Just as we finished eating, a knock sounded on the door. "Who can that be?" [My sister] Mare jumped up and ran to the door, we three at her heels. She threw it open. We stared open-mouthed and started backing away. There stood a wholly white apparition, an old man, his white hair and beard flowing over a long white fur-trimmed coat, a bulky white bag slung over his left shoulder. Even his boots and fur winter-cap were white.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" he smiled at our stunned faces."

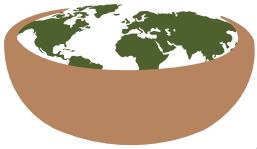
"But, but..." Mother almost stuttered as she joined us.

"It's all right," he winked at her and turned to us. "Have you each learned well what you want to perform for me?"

Mare, being the oldest at nine, preceded first and we each followed, and after Kalle had sung his short song, Yule Grandfather reached into his bag and drew out four chocolate candy bars and handed us each one. He winked at Mother again and was gone.

Starry-eyed, we turned as one to show Mother our treasure, but were bewildered and hurried over to where she slumped, head in hands, crying.

"Mother, why are you crying? Are you still sad?"



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“Mother, look, Yule Grandfather came after all.”

“Mother...”

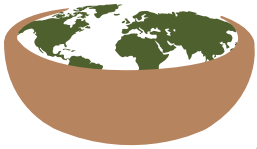
“Mother?”

She raised her tear-streaked face and her voice broke, “I’m not sad. I’m amazed—there is a Yule spirit after all. I wonder who...” and she smiled bravely to share our joy.

There were many other Yule-times where we received presents and had a real tree, some with real candles burning on the branches, and decorated with colored paper chains and white stars and snowflakes cut from folded paper, but that year is burned into my memory with a unique vividness, while the so-many others melt to become one general memory, whether in the camps or later. For in that year there really was a Yule Grandfather (Keenan n.d.)

Although the traditional Yule meal of a pork roast dinner with sauerkraut and holiday bread was not served on this magical day that Keenan recalls from the refugee camp, it has been a part of her holiday celebrations since and now connects her with this sacred memory. She also mentioned that instead of pork roast, many Estonians cooked blood sausage, but pork roast was easier to obtain when she was growing up. This dish was served with “mannakreem (a thin wheat porridge whipped with juice)” (Keenan 2014). Keenan explained that was also not usually an option in her family because whipping was so difficult.

Keenan noted that in Estonian tradition when the food was eaten on Yule Eve, it was important to leave out the leftovers for the “Little People”—the spirits who were kind to them throughout the year—as a gesture of thanks. This custom was also followed to ensure that the Little People would be kind in the upcoming year as well.



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Keenan emphasized the importance of this ritual act. She stated that the community would ostracize those who do not leave this food out. She also mentioned that although these old traditions were outlawed for many years, they are coming back (Keenan 2014). This fascinating aspect of the Estonian version of Yule—the honoring of the Little People—reflects an attitude of gratitude that extends well into Estonian culture. Giving back, it seems appears to be more important than receiving.

During my interview with Johanna Keenan, I noticed how the Estonian holiday traditions she described reflect who the Estonian people are and what values they hold dear. In the Estonian tradition, instead of material goods, the emphasis is on the family, and on hope. When children “sing for their supper,” it shifts the focus from consumerism and instead empowers them to become creative. As I listened, Keenan gave me a different perspective of what this holiday can mean, especially when she told her heart-warming story of Yule Eve in the refugee camp, where there was hope in the midst of despair.