

Thanksgiving in Moscow

by Jerri Carlin



St. Basil, Moscow

It was a cold day in Moscow. Although it was only November first, it felt like winter. We'd arrived in the middle of August and we were still settling into our apartment, still trying to find our way around this city of ten million people.

I hadn't given much thought to Thanksgiving, figuring we wouldn't have one. Just the idea of trying to find the foods we might want would be near impossible. It would also be a work day for my husband Dan, and being so far from home and family it wouldn't feel like a holiday.

But that same evening, Dan came home and announced there would be a Thanksgiving Dinner at a Russian restaurant, sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce. It would be a great chance to meet other Americans living in Moscow. It would also be the first year in our married life that I wouldn't cook a turkey. Or so I thought.

The next day my friend Faye, whom I'd just met in September at the International Women's Club, called and said, "Let's cook a Thanksgiving dinner for some of our new American friends." We thought it would be great to invite a few of our new Russian friends who also belonged to the Women's Club, so they could experience what this holiday means to us. I asked how many people she was thinking of inviting, and found it would probably be around sixteen. Since the Chamber dinner would be the evening of Thanksgiving, ours would be the following Saturday.

The Chamber dinner was a great success. At least 150 people attended. The menu included turkey, stuffing, gravy, potatoes and cranberry sauce. They even had pumpkin pie for desert. I was impressed. The restaurant was in a Stalin-era building located right next to the American embassy. The dinner was held in a very beautiful room. Rumor had it that the restaurant used to be a market where the elite Russians shopped.

Faye's dinner meant the two of us going all around the city looking for our ingredients. Faye had somehow gotten sweet potatoes sent over from the States. I had seen cranberry jelly at our local Stockman's grocery store. Stockman's was a very small Finnish store a short walk from my apartment where I did most of my shopping. I could fill two small plastic bags for about \$200. Yes, food there for ex-pats was very expensive.

The star of the show – the turkey – was something else all together. Faye found two smalls birds that didn't weigh more than 7 pounds apiece. Who ever heard of such small turkeys? They certainly wouldn't feed 16 people. I continued my search and had a little more luck. My turkey weighed 6600 grams or 14 pounds. The turkey had been imported and the wrapping had cooking directions in ten different languages. I still have this with my cooking notes. I didn't pay attention to the price. We needed the turkey.

Everyday, Faye called and added one or two more people. We certainly didn't want to miss an American who might be home alone! I think the final number of guests was 25. I wondered if we had enough turkey. To fix this, we decided on a few more appetizers and more potatoes.

On Saturday, I stuffed my bird with a mix I'd brought from the States, put it in the oven and set about to make an appetizer or two. We had to figure out how to transport all this across town – no easy task. Dan came up with the idea to put everything in a cooler, so it would be easier to handle. Then we called a taxi, another challenge, and off we went.

Faye and her husband Irwin had done a wonderful job setting up their apartment to accommodate the crowd for a sit-

down dinner. Soon after everyone arrived, there were lots of toasts in true Russian style, and then we sat down to a fantastic dinner. Our Russian friends enjoyed every moment. We tried to explain the Pilgrims but I am sure some things got lost in translation.

For someone so far, far away from home and family, who thought there would be no Thanksgiving dinner this year, I enjoyed two.

After 22 moves, Jerri Carlin and her husband retired to Brewster in 2001. She is currently writing her memoir: *A Short Walk To The Kremlin*, about their life in Russia from 1996-1999.

Blending Family & Holiday Traditions

by Dorothy Cohen

I'm Christian and my husband is Jewish, therefore making us the ultimate blended family. What this statement doesn't tell you is how exhausting it is. Oy, let me tell you.

When we first got married, there was no discussion of religion. Who cared? We were in love. Kids came. They were both girls, so there was no discussion of needing a bris. Again, who cared? We had plenty of time to figure it out before they got older. Boy, were we stupid.

We celebrated everything. Small children don't worry too much about what holiday they're celebrating, as long as presents are involved.

Long before we made any decisions about whether to attend church or temple, holidays always posed the biggest challenge for us. For instance, when the kids were young, those church Easter egg hunts were all the rage with their friends. The same thing with those pretty Easter baskets. You know the ones, with the fuzzy stuffed animal and the fake grass sitting atop all that teeth-rotting candy. We've always justified it to our girls (and ourselves) by saying it was a "spring celebration" basket.

As it turns out, the joke's on us. We dragged our feet for a long time, not making any decisions. When our oldest daughter was ten years old, we finally made our decision. We joined a temple and started our girls' Jewish religious training. Talk about dissension in the ranks!

The "spring" baskets are one of the holiday traditions they can't let go of. It's pretty difficult to sit at the family table celebrating Passover and eating bitter herbs, tasting them because life was bitter for my kids' Jewish forbearers...and then having the kids leave the table to eat a chocolate bunny. I can see them in the psychiatrist's chair now.

I'd like to say we've given up the dual spring holidays, but we haven't. I fear a violent mutiny in my home if we ever really did.

Ah, and now the Christmas/Chanukah season is upon us. The most maddening season of all. I remember our first holiday together, when we were just married. We were decorating the tree - maybe you know the one? It's the one dedicated to the wild creatures, having nothing to do with celebrating the birth of Jesus, because my husband didn't believe in that part of the bible. My mother-in-law called to speak to her son while we were decorating...and I told her what he was busy doing.

It took him about 20 minutes to talk her down from the ledge.

It's only gotten worse as our kids grow older. We've had plenty of awkwardness around this joyous season. Bubbeh (a.k.a. Grandma) (a.k.a. mother-in-law) now lives with us. She bitterly endures the Christmas tree that we still erect in the living room each December in honor of those little squirrels and forest creatures.



When I close my eyes, I can picture the tableau on a typical night of Channukah; my family lighting the menorah and reciting the traditional Jewish prayers, bathed in the gentle twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. Religious dysfunction at its best!

I also feel like a "double agent" when I take the kids to temple. I once mentioned to the rabbi that we'd had pork for dinner the night before (I'm Protestant, what did I know??) Big oops!!! It was like the scene from a movie where everyone's chatting and the minute the dreaded sentence is uttered - in the case, "we had pork for dinner" - everything went quiet.

Awkward AND uncomfortable!

Being a blended family brings many joys and challenges. Okay, mostly challenges. But we're a happy family and I wouldn't change it for anything in the world.

L'Chaim.

A Cape Cod native, Dorothy Cohen lives in Harwich with her blended family and kennel of animals.



December Red, Courtesy of the Simie Maryles Gallery

Christmas, 2002

by Joan Graham

The plan was for us to visit my husband Christmas morning at the rehab where he was recovering from surgeries prior to his anticipated January 2nd homecoming.

In response to his "I can't get you anything for Christmas," I would buy and wear a coveted cashmere sweater as his gift to me. After the visit, our sons and I would join friends for Christmas dinner at their nearby home.

All of our plans were shattered by my husband's unexpected death at 4:53 pm on Christmas Eve. Shocked and numb, we didn't know what to do with ourselves on Christmas Day. To go or not to go? There's no protocol for this one. Finally, we decided to walk down the street to our friends' house.

Andy and her family had lost their husband/father, also our good friend, two years before, on the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend. I knew they would understand what a surreal day it was.

I don't know what was served, what was said, how long we stayed. I don't think we exchanged gifts. I remember nothing except that it was the best thing we could have done on the worst Christmas.

Joan Graham is a writer, a bereavement counselor with an office in Brewster, and a perpetual student.

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