

Latvia - Christmas tree's 507th birthday!

by Andrejs Mezmalis

This year, as every year, we celebrate the Yule season with festive meals and decorate our Christmas tree with lights and ornaments. None of us really can feel the true spirit of Christmas without a Christmas tree. But, do we ever stop to think or wonder where did the Christmas tree custom really come from? When, where and how did this truly beautiful tradition originate?

The earliest known documentation pertaining to the use a Christmas tree to celebrate the birth of Christ is from Latvia. "Surprisingly enough," writes Phillip V. Snyder in *The Christmas Tree Book*, "the two oldest pieces of documentation are not from Germany, a country frequently associated in most peoples' minds with the Christmas tree, but from Latvia and Estonia."

In Latvia, now a free country, that was forcibly and illegally occupied by the Soviets-Russians in 1940-1941, by the Germans in 1941-1945 and again by the Soviets-Russians during 1945-1991, a Christmas tree celebration was recorded 507 years ago, in 1510, in the Latvia's capital City of Riga. Four years later, in 1514, a tree Christmas tree celebration was also recorded in Reval, Estonia. The chronicles note, writes Snyder, that "in each city on Christmas Eve, after a festive dinner, black-hatted members of the local merchants' guild carried an evergreen tree decorated with artificial roses to the marketplace, where, in a seeming vestige of paganism (or an ancient religious rite), they danced around the tree and then set fire to it." But, what were the true origins of this old tradition? Was it some ancient religious rite or custom that had survived through the ages? Indeed, the answer lies in the ancient religious customs of the Balts, the collective name assigned to the Latvians, Lithuanians and the Old Prussians, and their ancient religious practices.

We know from history that the last bastions of an ancient and once very influential Indo-European religion and its associated customs were located in Latvia, Lithuania and ancient Prussia. All three of these Baltic peoples shared a common heritage – a 4000-year or older culture, religion, language and traditions. The Balts were the last to be converted to Christianity in Europe, dating back to the 12th and 13th centuries and the so-called Baltic Crusades. However, their religious influence was once spread far beyond their borders into Estonia, Scandinavia, Teutonic tribal areas to the West and the Slavic lands to the East. This religious influence is noted in the distant past, when the Balts were invoking their thunder diety *Perkons* (Latvian) in various peace treaties of ancient times. For example, the Hittites, who had once established the Hittite Empire in the Middle East (Turkey, etc.) and are noted in the Old Testament of the Bible; the Hittites once fought and defeated Ramses II, who ruled in ancient Egypt around the time when Moses was leading the Children of Israel to their Promised Land. After Ramses'

defeat by the Hittites, a peace treaty was written on a gold sheet, on one side in Egyptian hieroglyphics and on the other side in the Hittite language, wherein the Hittites invoked their war god *Perkons*, the same god that was held in esteem by the ancient Balts.

The Balts fought the entire Christendom for 300 years during the so-called Baltic Crusades. During this brutal historic period, when the Balts were fighting against the German crusaders, they were not only fighting for their survival and their millennia-old sacred homelands, but also for their culture, traditions and preservation of their ancient religion. Noteworthy is a fact that the ancient Balts believed in the same God as the Christians and the Jews (God the Almighty and Heavenly Father) centuries before the Christians and Christianity arrived in Europe and before Moses led the Children of Israel out of Egypt. This fact is supported by more recent medieval records that note that the Lithuanian King Gediminas, in November 1323, told the envoys of the Papal Nunzios in Riga that he and his people would remain firm in their Indo-European faith and the belief in one God. He told the envoys that he had not promised to receive baptism but merely to preserve peace with Christendom: "I had stated verily that I will permit the Christians to worship God according to the manner of their faith, the Ruthenes according to theirs, the Poles according to theirs, while we ourselves will worship God according to our customs. We all worship one God.... I shall remain in the faith inherited by paternal tradition, and I shall defend it with blood unto death." Sunii Kamar Chatterji of the Indian Institute of Advance Studies in India noted in 1966 that, "One cannot but admire profoundly the civilized and enlightened attitude of a non-Christian Baltic King of the fourteenth century, inspired by the national inheritance of his ancient Indo-European religion." This provides a glimpse into the ancient Balts' thinking and the strongly-rooted customs and traditions, among which most likely was the use of a Christmas tree to celebrate an old religious rite during the winter solstice, which occurs on 21st of December. We must remember, the original Christmas was celebrated on the 21st of December for the first three centuries of Christianity, afterward changed to 25th of December.

But, who were the original Balts? An answer to that question is given to us by historian A. L. Bashan of India. Writing in his book, *The Wonder That Was India*, Bashan notes that when the ancient Indo-Europeans entered India, they brought with them their own religion and gods, their horses and chariots. Some of them entered Europe and became the ancient Greeks, Latins, Celts and Germans, while some went into Anatolia (today's Turkey) and founded the large Hittite empires, while others, the ancient Balts, remained in their homelands. In these ancient homelands (present-day Latvia and Lithuania, Old Prussia, northern Germany and Parts of northern areas of Poland), the Baltic peoples shared and practiced a common religion and had a well-established religious hierarchy and social order. Among their common religious customs included holy places of

worship and the centers of religious activity led by priests - stately oak groves created by God. In these oak groves, in the temples created by God, the priests maintained perpetual fires that kept the oak tree foliage green well into the start of winter. Death was the punishment for those who allowed the fires to go out. The climax of the winter religious activity occurred during the winter solstice on the 21st of December each year. This event, very much like the summer solstice celebration which is still practiced in Latvia to this day, was marked by festive meals, dancing and religious rites. The maintenance of the perpetual fires signified everlasting life, victory over death and darkness and the coming of new life and light (spring). The age-old customs and traditions, along with the ancient Latvian and Lithuanian languages, which are the oldest living languages in Europe, are a heritage for all to share and cherish. Some historians believe that these languages hold the key to unlocking the ancient mysteries of the Hittites, the distant cousins of the Balts.

Therefore, it is not surprising and very logical then, that an evergreen, a Christmas tree, would be selected by the Christianized Latvians, in 1510 or even earlier, to commemorate an ancient and not-yet-forgotten religious rite on Christmas Eve, to celebrate victory over darkness and the coming of new light and eternal life – the birth and acceptance of Christ. This ancient tradition or religious rite was in perfect harmony with the gospels announcing the birth of Christ. Acceptance of Christ meant everlasting life! Thus, the medieval Latvians were symbolizing this event of everlasting life, Christmas, by an evergreen tree, very much like their ancient ancestors had observed their “everlasting life” ritual for millennia earlier in their ancestral oak-grove Temples created by God.

Therefore, it should not be surprising that 507 years ago the Christmas tree tradition was quickly accepted by the Latvian brothers to the west, the Prussians, and by their Lithuanian brothers to the south, all sharing the same heritage and a not-yet-forgotten religious tradition. The Germanized Prussians readily and quickly accepted this old tradition and it quickly spread to most of northern Germany, Scandinavia and beyond. The Christmas tree tradition that we celebrate today, therefore, is a continuation of an ancient tradition that fuses together the belief in eternal life with the birth of Christ. How beautiful and joyful, in perfect harmony of the old with the new!

In the Soviet-Russian occupied Baltic States during the 1940-1941 and 1945-1991 periods, Christmas celebrations were officially outlawed. In place of this beautiful tradition, the Russians had introduced a “New Year’s Tree” to represent the coming of the New Year and a “Grandpa Frost” arriving in a polar-bear-pulled sleigh. For the enslaved Christians in the Baltic States at that time, Christmas time became a nightmare of Soviet-KGB activity and terror. Today, the Christmas-tree tradition is once again “free in its original homeland”, spreading joy, happiness and tidings of good will toward all men!