But We Didn't Call It Christmas

By Mel Lavine

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(Every December I feel a little guilty taking the day off to recycle a story I've told before. But I think of it as a carol for Christmas and for auld lang syne.)

My mother came to this country in the early years of the last century from Lithuania where Jewish people lived pent-up in ghettos and where she knew little of the outside world. Her worst nightmares, which continued into old age, were of the Russian police swooping down on her neighborhood on horseback, ransacking stalls, shops and houses and attacking innocent people.

She was eleven when she arrived here, speaking no English, knowing nothing at all about the strange, new land called America. The third of eight immigrant children, she was inspired by the progressives of the day, led by Theodore Roosevelt, a man ahead of his time, and perhaps of our own as well.

“There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans,” Theodore Roosevelt said. We were all one people, newcomers and native-born alike.

The openness of the new country won her confidence. She was eager to be accepted, taken as just another American.

When her boat docked at Ellis Island she had no birth certificate, no legal document attesting to a date of birth.

The world was a lot looser then. People moved about with far fewer restrictions than they do today. The immigration officers could not spell most of the strange names, let alone pronounce them; so they gave people new names.

Once she was settled in Boston with her family, my mother took note of the fuss made over the Christmas holiday, saw the world around her take on new life with evergreen trees decorated with lights and ornaments, department store windows a profusion of color and fantasy, people singing carols, and on Christmas morning children setting out in a town blanketed in snow, with shiny new boots ands coats, caps and sweaters and skates and sleds, and all because of Christmas.

But my mother's family didn't celebrate Christmas. Her father was ultra orthodox, a fan of Teddy Roosevelt to be sure, but he would have raised hell, fire and damnation if my mother or any of his children dared commit such a sacrilege.

And so my mother faced a quandary. She wanted to honor her father but she wanted to be in step with the rest of her splendid new country, especially on this most wondrous of days.

And so it came to pass that my mother resolved her problem by taking December 25 for her birthday. That's how she got around the taboo, and got her presents and parties on this special day. But we never called it Christmas. Not even after my grandfather died. Not ever, not in all my mother's years, and she lived to a ripe age of eighty-seven.

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York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.