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Resident shares how she spend Christmas in Romania

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BY TINA GAMEZ,DAILY NEWS-SUN |

Litchfield Park resident Rodica (Miron) Heinz, formerly of Surprise, left Dec. 12 with her husband Larry, to spend Christmas in Romania with her family.

Born in 1959 in Manzati, Romania, Heinz grew up in a small village with three brothers and where her parents were farmers in the communist country, "Where they didn't have their own land, they just had to work, they had a space and (after) a year and then they would allow them to have around the house about two acres to feed their families," she said.

"I was in that village until I was 14. They had only up to eighth grade, so after that, I moved to Baslui to do my high school and live with my father's brother." After high school, Heinz attended the university on the other side of the country by Timsoara and got a degree in engineering.

"As a child, we grew up very poor. Parents as farmers, they had very little salary, little to nothing. As I remember Christmas as a kid, we've never had a tree, we've never had ornaments. We might get some stockings and some things under the pillow with candies and clothes because we needed warm clothes," Heinz said.

Putting the gifts under the pillows was the best way to do it because, "They were trying to put (gifts) under the pillow when the kids were sleeping." When they woke up in the morning, they would hunt for Christmas gifts. "That was a tradition at that time."

"That is how I remember Christmas as a kid and most of the kids in that time were like this."

She said they attended church Christmas Eve in the morning, Christmas day and the day after. "Romanians are Christian Orthodox and they are very, very big on Christianity and going to church and Christmas is celebrated for three days. People go to church for three days.

"The Masses are huge, especially in the cities." People are outside of the churches because they don't have big churches, but there are a lot of people.

"The big celebration was getting the family together," and they would sacrifice the pig, which is a ritual, she said. The family would get together and they would prepare the meat, make sausages, everything needed for the whole winter. The whole animal is used. It takes place on one of the three days of Christmas.

"They would celebrate with red wine, fresh pork meat prepared right there and the family getting together celebrating Christmas."

Other foods eaten during Christmas are sarmale which is similar to cabbage rolls, but made with sauerkraut, a sweet bread called cozonac and red wine.

As a child, Heinz said they would go to church Christmas Day as a family. After church, the grandparents would not be able to afford to put a

meal together for the entire family, so one of their children which could be 12 to 15 of them, would do it, taking turns each year. The host is responsible for preparing the whole meal.

"The culture in Romania is a lot different around New Year's, they do a lot of carols. Kids are going from houses to houses," she said. "And for Christmas too. They usually get walnuts, apples or a kind of bread," which is given at the homes they sing at.

"It's beautiful because they get in huge groups." Heinz said the kids organize themselves into groups of 20 people. "Their carols are just amazing. Or they can be adults getting together." They sing at relatives' homes.

Caroling at Christmas takes place Christmas day during the day. When the adult caroling group shows up at someone's house and there is a big party taking place, they're invited to drink a glass of wine and then they move onto the next. The kids get candies, the bread and money and some dress up in costume to go caroling.

When she participated. "I loved it because there was snow and it was beautiful, because you go around midnight. To wish people happy New Year, you'd go just before midnight."

Heinz's daughter, Elena Costin, 29, a hospital pharmacy manager in Phoenix, had gifts put under her pillow until she was 10 years old. They came to the United States in 1993.

Gifts under the pillow changed to gifts under the tree in America. "I don't think the first year I had a tree, but the second year because everyone had a tree, I had to find a tree and even though I was struggling with money too, making \$800 (a month) the second year in America, I did get a tree and put gifts under the tree."

Heinz said she didn't know any English. "I started to learn English first through the Maricopa Community College Skills Center, completed a degree in accounting and continued at Rio Salado, Estrella Mountain Community College and eventually a university masters degree. She met her husband, Larry, at Estrella and who is an adjunct faculty member there. They've been married since 2006.

"Now, Romania is exposed to Europe and to the cultures that embrace Christmas, embrace celebrating Christmas with a lot of lights, with a lot of ornaments, but still in the small villages, actually even in the cities, the salaries are \$300 per month and the prices for food are just like in the United States.

"If they do have money, they will purchase a tree, but in the small villages, there are no trees, no money, so people exchange some gifts."

"People struggle. Ten percent of the country is very rich. In 1989 we got rid of the communism. They are opening businesses, but only ten percent of the population is rich. All the rest, 90 percent struggle from day to day.

One of her brothers died four years ago and her dad died in 1956.

As far as gifts for her family in Romania, she said, "My family right now, they're asking for money."

She said, "So this time, there will be envelopes under the pillows," as she laughed, and said she will try to get a Christmas tree.

Heinz is the Director of Learning Support Services/Academic Affairs at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale.

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