



THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR



Placi Gomez, now retired, an Airbnb host and part-time cricket commentator on radio, reminisces and shares his childhood memories of the Christmas scene in Pettah – where his parents ran a grocery shop in the 60s – and the joy of Christmas carols.

Amidst the hustle and bustle of city life at Christmas time, one of the busiest shopping precincts in Colombo in the 50s and 60s was Main Street in Pettah.

Our family-run grocery shop and pharmacy, M.P. Gomez & Co., was on Main Street and in the weeks leading to Christmas there was frenzied activity at the shop which was filled with those stocking up for the festive season. The flurry and commotion inside the premises made it necessary for extra hands to be hired. My elder siblings helped out too, but with most tasks undertaken manually before the advent of computers, it took a gigantic effort by all to cater to each and every need.

International brands of spiced, smoked and leg ham, frankfurters, chipolatas and bockwurst sausages, sheep tongue, corned mutton and Edam cheese were some of the items in great demand during the festive season. However, the most popular item was the salt beef from Australia that came in large wooden barrels. This was a favourite of the Burgher community as well as our family and an essential delicacy at the Christmas lunch table. The other big attraction for shoppers was the exciting and enticing selection of assorted Suchard and Lindt chocolates from Switzerland, which was most tempting at Christmas time.

In those days, most family-run grocery and wine shops, pharmacies, and even fabric and linen shops in the Pettah area belonged to the Bharatha community, an ethnic group whose devotion to the Catholic faith only matched their fondness for wine, food and song. They had unique names like Gomez's, Victoria's, Pereira's, Motha's, Carvallio's, Paiva's and Roche's. All these stores had an impressively wide array of imported items that were brought down primarily from Europe.

Christmas cake was usually made at home and foreign ingredients such as raisins, sultanas, candied peel, cherries, chow chow, ginger preserve and 'Star' brand essences were mainly sourced from UK, Europe and Australia. These were abundantly stocked at Gomez's which was well patronised by Burgher clans like the Bulners, Janszs, Kellarts, Van Langanbergs, Holsingers and Pieterszs. This easy-going, fun-loving lot were best known for their Christmas cake, their delicious home-made breudher and ginger beer. 'Globe' brand butter – another indispensable item for Christmas cake and breudher – was imported exclusively by G. C. Roche & Co.

At that time, M.P. Gomez & Co. held the exclusive agency for 'Wincarnis' tonic wine shipped from the UK. Rich in energy-giving Vitamin B, it was a natural tonic that stimulated the appetite and helped maintain overall good health and was one of the more popular items on the Christmas bucket list. 'Stones' Ginger Wine was another Christmas favourite stocked by the company.

Our staff made home deliveries on bicycles – a very common mode of transport at that time. Baking of the Christmas cake was usually done at Royal Bakery in Wellawatte.





CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

One of the most popular seasonal events in the 60s was the Police Christmas Carols. Held annually at Police Park, this culminated in a rousing fireworks display. Police Park was exquisitely decorated with multi-colour lights strung across the huge and majestic trees, creating a fairytale setting for this showpiece event. Although more of a family get-together, the ambience and carnival atmosphere was also an ideal setting for young couples to enjoy a few romantic moments together. The Police band and Police choir held centre stage with a delightful repertoire of Christmas carols and melodies with the audience joining in, setting the tone for the festive mood and Christmas cheer.

Before the genesis of Christmas carol services organized by Christian schools, small groups of choristers used to go from house-to-house singing carols accompanied only by a portable organ or a guitar; this was a seasonal pastime enjoyed by most of us, not simply for the singing and merrymaking but also to savour the enticing assortment of 'short eats' and drinks that were served so lavishly and generously at each home.

On one such occasion, one of the younger girls took a huge gulp of vodka mistaking it for water much to our amusement; she had to live with a new nickname for quite some time. On another occasion our group obliged by singing the Christmas song 'O Tannenbaum' in German at the request of a German family and their friends who were all decked out in Bohemian costumes to add a bit of glamour and colour to the evening.

Comprising six boys and four girls, ours was a family of siblings almost large enough to form a cricket team. My parents made it mandatory and a tradition that we all attend the Christmas midnight service as one family, at the small and compact chapel at St. Michael's Nursing Home that was founded by my father. The midnight mass was usually celebrated by a Jesuit priest and the singing of those beautiful Christmas carols conveyed the joyful spirit and the true

significance of the Nativity of Jesus. Each year we sang our entrance hymn 'O Come All Ye Faithful' to the noisy clatter of fireworks outside, to herald the dawn of Christmas.

On one occasion the priest of Italian descent urged us all to sing with gusto as the Rev. Sisters of the Holy Cross Order tried valiantly to pitch the high notes, especially when trying to deliver "O Holy Night."

In the latter years the family took over the singing duties from the Rev. Sisters, releasing them of this task and together with the De Niese and Cabraal families joining in, made it a more melodious and harmonious experience.

In the words of that lovely Christmas melody "Mistletoe and Wine," Christmas was also a "time for giving and for getting" and this was a tenet very close to the hearts of my parents and our family. In addition to the usual exchange of gifts that took place at the family Christmas lunch, it was so heartwarming to see my parents show their gratitude with gifts to our domestic helpers, drivers and loyal employees at the Pettah Shop and Nursing Home, who made it a point to visit our home on December 25th.

My father used to unfailingly deliver a sumptuous Christmas lunch, with all the extra trimmings ordered from Elephant House, to the Rev. Sisters who worked so selflessly, diligently and caringly at St. Michael's to help make it the most sought after maternity nursing home in the city in the 60s and 70s. My mother, who was heavily involved in social activities in our parish church at Thimbirigasyaya and a pillar of the 'Ladies of Charity,' ensured we all got involved in the collection, organizing and distribution of Christmas hampers to the most needy, poor and marginalized in the parish. The Redemptorist and Jesuit clergy were also sent some special seasonal delights on Christmas Day by my parents. The benchmark was set for the next generation to follow.

We all looked forward to Christmas and immersed ourselves in the celebrations and joys of the season. It was indeed, "The most wonderful time of the year!"

