

# Jackson in the Holiday Season

*John Q. Barrett\**

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On December 20, 1945, the Nuremberg trial was in its fifth week. Twenty-four actual trial days had been completed and United States prosecutors were still presenting their case—the leading and largest, and only the first of four, national presentations of evidence—to the International Military Tribunal.

On that Thursday, the IMT judges recessed the trial for a two-week holiday break. They decided to recess over the strong objections of U.S. chief prosecutor Justice Robert H. Jackson. He then was in the seventh month of his presidential assignment to prosecute the principal Nazi war criminals, away from the Supreme Court as its 1945 Term was progressing, and trying to complete the trial and return to the U.S. as quickly as possible.

Late that afternoon, in his office in the Palace of Justice on the outskirts of devastated Nürnberg, Jackson wrote a long letter to his wife, his daughter and his daughter-in-law. It chronicles his holiday circumstances and, as Jackson’s writing typically did, it shows a lot of himself:

Dec 20 1945

Dear Rene, Mary and Nancy:-

Well here we are at Christmas—I have plenty of money and can’t buy a thing. At least my shopping problem is simple.

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\* Professor of Law, St. John’s University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York ([www.roberthjackson.org](http://www.roberthjackson.org)). I emailed earlier versions of this essay to the Jackson List on December 22, 2005, and on December 22, 2014.

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The Tribunal against our protest voted a recess from Dec 20 to Jan 2. We wanted to work right through except Christmas day. But nothing doing with the French + British so near home. The time is too long to remain here in waiting and not time enough to get home [to the U.S.] + back safely. I can't take a chance on the long delays now caused by weather over the Atlantic.

We have planned a short trip to the ~~sun~~ sunshine south of the Alps—Riviera—Rome—(1 day) Athens (1 day) Cairo—If possible we will go to the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem for midnight Christmas eve service. It is only 40 minutes by air from Cairo and Cairo two days from here. Then on the way back we will cut our trip to fit our time. Seems a rare chance to see something of the Near East. Our party will be only eight—Gordon Dean—Col. [Robert] Gill—Bill [Jackson's executive assistant and son, William E. Jackson]—Capt. [John] Vonetes—Roger Barrett a fine boy from Chicago [\*no, no relation][—]R.H.J.—and Jean MacFetridge and Elsie [Jackson's secretary Elsie L. Douglas]. ... We have our own plane and the Army is taking care of us at each point.

... Last night we gave a combination dinner for staff members.... The cooks and boys got a tree—Elsie made all sorts of things to put on it by way of decorations—nuts and cookies tied up in paper napkins, cut outs of horseshoes, the moon, stars etc etc and finally one of the boys from some German got some lights and Elsie's mother sent some icycycles (however you spell it). It made a really beautiful tree. Then a turkey dinner. It was exactly six months before that our plane landed in London—only ones [from that original group] here now were Bill, [Larry] Coleman, [Gordon] Dean, Jean MacFetridge, Alma Soller, Elsie & I. We drank a ~~wine~~ Rhine wine—(liberated) to ourselves + then made the others drink one to us. Then they all went to the [house's] music room and sang Christmas carols—then we had a bus take us all out to the Press Camp where the correspondents were having a rather shabby dance—but for policy reasons I had to show up. Back about midnight—at least things are early around here. Everybody thought we

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had a darned good time considering. Santa Claus came to our house too—Elsie gave Bill + me each a pair of pajamas—made us ashamed we had not thought so far ahead [back in London that summer, to buy gifts before coming to Nuremberg]. ...

The case is going well. There is complaint that it is dreary. So it is for people who don't like hard facts. I have tried to avoid making it spectacular. But don't worry.

... Love and good wishes—more later

Bob<sup>1</sup>

(Jackson's late December 1945 holiday trip with stops around the Mediterranean Sea did come off as planned. Eight years later, in what turned out to be the last year of his life, he described that trip quite lyrically in an autobiographical fragment:

I have journeyed to Jerusalem and on a Christmas even to Bethlehem, where walking outside the little village the shepherds were still tending their flocks and the stars seemed almost within reach. And I have lingered for days at Luxor, resting in the shade cast by temples that the faith of men built 4,000 years ago and trudging through a city of tombs that bespoke their belief that death was a beginning as well as an end.<sup>2</sup>)

The Robert Jackson of Christmastime 1945—he a leading player on the world stage, commanding the power of military occupation, immersed in and proving the horrors of Nazism and World War II, experiencing the wonders of geography and history—is one piece of him and the holiday experience.

Jackson's December 1945 also letter shows quite plainly, however, that he was even then, in all of his Nuremberg power and special

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Robert H. Jackson to Irene G. Jackson, Mary J. Loftus & Nancy R. Jackson, Dec. 20, 1945, in Robert H. Jackson Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C. ("RHJL"), Box 2, Folder 3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Jackson, *The Faith of My Fathers* (circa 1954).

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circumstances, a man of human values and not much pretense—as he had been from his humble beginnings and earlier years.

Consider, for example, a Christmastime in the mid-1920s. Bob Jackson then was a Jamestown, New York, lawyer in his early 30s. He and Irene had been married since 1916 and their children Bill and Mary were young. At holiday time, they hosted at home their friends Royal and Alace Bates. The men went out and then returned with young Bill Jackson’s first toy train—“a wind up affair.” And then, as Alace Bates recalled it years later, “those big boys”—Jamestown lawyers Bob Jackson and Royal Bates—“played with it all evening then did the tree and we all made merry.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Christmas card from Alace Bates to Irene G. Jackson, n.d. (circa Dec. 1954), in RHJL, Box 6, Folder 2.