

„Bei uns ist immer was los!“

## HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS TREE / GESCHICHTE DES WEIHNACHTSBAUMES

**Christmas tree: der Weihnachtsbaum, die Weihnachtsbäume**  
**history: die Geschichte**

### *The Christmas Tree Spread from Germany*

The history of the Christmas tree is no less complicated. The connection between the Christmas tree and the pre-Christian use of green branches and lights for the religious cult of winter has often been maintained, but it has never been proven. The connection of the evergreen fir tree (earlier the box tree was also used) with candles can be traced back to early 17th century Alsace. Then in the course of the 19th century this custom spread over all of Germany and over great sections of the world. Today both the Christmas tree and the Christmas presents are an intrinsic part of every German family's Christmas. Electric candles are coming into increasingly wide-spread use today, but they have not been able to entirely replace real wax candles. Artificial Christmas trees and branches of Mistletoe as substitutes for the real ones are rarely found in German homes.

Public Christmas trees were first set up in New York in 1912. Since 1919 this practice has been spreading in Germany. Today they may be found as a part of the extensive Christmas decorations put up in business streets, and are a characteristic feature of German cities during the Christmas season.

With the development in modern society of new forms of the Christmas celebration, the older, pre-industrial forms of the celebration receded into the background. This applies, for example, to the numerous superstitious traditions connected with Christmas. People thought that they had to protect themselves from various sorts of spirits, or that from various omens they could divine the future. Modern life has made the old magical practices meaningless — magical practices like sacrificing food in order to promote the well-being of the animals and plants important to the agricultural economy, or the proclaiming of Christ's birth to the animals in the stable.

A number of old Christmas customs which were practiced in particular regions of Germany have also nearly disappeared. In many regions it was customary for people to hold costume parades, or to go out caroling and gathering presents. Instead of Christmas trees, or in addition to them, there were Christmas pyramids made of wood (nowadays the Christmas pyramids made in the "Erzgebirge" area of East Germany, which are set into whirling motion by the rising air of the candles, are regaining popularity). Christmas manger scenes with artistically carved wooden figures were and

still are set up in people's homes and in churches. During the Christmas services Christmas plays ("Krippenspiele") were (and in some places still are) put on. This is a custom which arose in the Middle Ages.

### CUSTOM OF CHRISTMAS TREE CENTURIES OLD

The Christmas tree, brightly decorated with shimmering lights and glittering ornaments, reflecting the traditions of each individual family is perhaps the most universally treasured of all the Christmas customs. It commands a position of central importance during all the holiday festivities from the moment when the tree is set up.

It is hard to believe that until about 200 years ago the custom of setting up a tree was only observed in Germany. Legend credits Martin Luther with having set up the very first Christmas tree. For Luther, the tree decorated with countless candles was a way of representing to his children the glory of starlit Heaven.

The first Christmas trees can be traced back to the early 17th century to the city of Strassburg. They were fir trees decorated with colored paper, gold foil, apples, toys and candies. By the 18th century the Christmas tree was a relatively familiar sight all over Germany.

The first Christmas trees in America were probably erected by German immigrants. The first American president to set up a Christmas tree at the White House was Franklin Pierce. He was president from 1853 to 1857. The tradition of lighting a Christmas tree on the White House lawn was established during the presidency of Calvin Coolidge.

### *Trees in the Church*

The Catholic Church has played a special part with regard to Christmas greenery. It used of old to be completely opposed to this, presuming, not unjustly, that a great regard for greenery was a facade for heathendom and a relapse into pre-Christian customs.

Very much time passed before the Church allowed "Christ trees" (the only permissible name!) to be set up in churches. From the 13th and 14th centuries onwards, Catholics had taken over cribs from the Franciscan tradition as a substitute for greenery. When children in Protestant districts go and visit their playmates around Christmas, they say "We want to see your tree" whilst in Catholic areas they would still talk of wanting to see the crib. These differences are, of course, on the decline now, particularly in the big towns — and yet there are still many fathers who take their youngest to see cribs in local churches between Christmas and the New Year.

It was only recently therefore that the Christ or the Christmas tree was accepted in Catholic areas. This happened around 1900 in towns but took considerably longer in country districts. The tree only made its way in the hills on both sides of the Rhine after the First World War. Older village people report that they first experienced a Christmas tree in the home around 1930. It was even longer before the tree reached the last village church.