

"Bei uns ist immer was los!"

TANNENBAUM / CHRISTMAS TREE

Christmas Tree

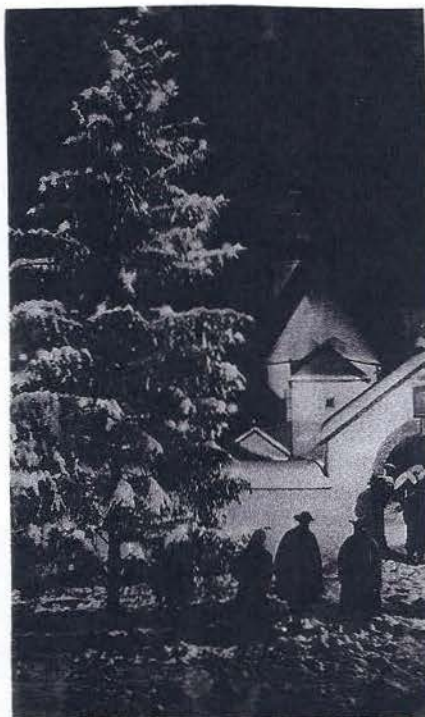
"Oh Tannenbaum, Oh Tannenbaum," sing the Germans at Christmas. Without a doubt, Christmas just wouldn't be Christmas without a tree. Year after year it dominates German living rooms with its array of decorations and candles (or for those who favor electric strings of lights, white only!) But where does the custom of the Christmas tree actually come from, and how long has it been with us?

Well, it is neither an ancient tradition, as many surmise, nor is it of pagan Germanic origin. As we know the Christmas tree today, in its manifold variations worldwide, it dates back only about 400 years:

In the year 1570 a guild chronicle in Bremen mentioned a small fir tree, decorated with dates, apples, nuts, pretzels and paper flowers, which had been set up in the guild house. The edible decorations were intended for children, who were allowed to shake them down out of the tree. Over the decades and centuries, the social celebrations in the guild halls developed into the family Christmas celebrations we are familiar with today, including the tree with lights and presents stacked beneath.

Christmas trees are not only a typical German symbol of festivity, but a significant economic factor as well. Nowadays, some 17 million trees are required each year . . . trees for which the buyers must often shell out a pretty penny. The actual prices depend on size and species. Right at the top of the popularity chart ranks the spruce, followed by the blue spruce and the silver fir. Few buyers show much interest in more exotic species from North America or the Orient.

Fir trees are by far the most economical, running at between 25 and 40 marks, as they are most plentiful domestically. A blue spruce can be had for between 30 and 50 marks, whereas a Norway spruce, for example, at a height of a bit over six feet can run as high as 100 marks. All total, West Germans spend some 330 million marks a year on Christmas trees.



The competition is stiff, though, as someone seems to be offering Christmas trees on just about every street corner. Imagination is the key to sales success. City-dwellers can go out and chop down their own tree at the nursery or in selected forest areas; that's a somewhat cheaper solution, and they can at least be sure that their tree is fresh. And at city markets, dealers lure customers with discounts, if the buyer signs on to buy a tree from the same seller the next year. More or less the same golden rule applies for buyers everywhere: the tree should appear to be "healthy," the needles should be elastic and deep green in color.

Every year at Christmas, the same discussion arises: pro and contra Christmas trees. Environmental protectionists of all persuasions speak out against the cutting of trees and demand that consumers should do without for the sake of the ecology. One thing is certain, however: dispensing with Christmas trees does little to promote environmental protection, because Christmas trees are cultivated specifically for that purpose. Most of them come from nursery and forestry operations

which have specialized in the Christmas tree business. The rest are saplings from newly planted areas in the forests, where a certain percentage of the trees have to be felled in order to ensure adequate space and light for the remainder. In that way, the forest remains healthier, with greater resistance to air pollution. For died-in-the-wool sceptics there is always the possibility of buying a tree complete with roots, which can then be re-planted in the yard or family garden following the holiday season.

What would a Christmas tree be without decorations? But that, of course, is where you really start running into money. Gone are the days when anyone was satisfied with dates, apples, nuts, gingerbread and paper flowers. Nowadays, the tree's outfit has to match fashion trends, and clever businesspeople know how to exploit that. Year after year, they modify their arrays of Christmas tree decorations to suit consumer desires. Colorful glass balls, for example, are definitely out. Something new is called for: pink candles, pink ribbons and bows, pink glass balls (Germans have never been big on tinsel), or perhaps everything in white? In any case, the tree is a must, and its embellishment is worth a deep dip into the wallet or bank account.

And once the holidays are over? The festivities have died down, but there is still that tree, which has lost much of its glamor and simply has to be disposed of. Some just chop it up into small pieces and burn it in the fireplace; others turn it over to the sanitation department (when and where that is possible). The more imaginative make something out of the remains, and pick out their tree in the first place with that purpose in mind. For example, a tree with a straight and solid core can be pared down for use as a mixing stick or any variety of other kitchen implements. There is really no limit to the imagination on ways to be rid of past-their-prime Christmas trees. Those who opted for a plastic tree in the first place have it easiest, of course; all they have to do is fold it up and carry it down to the basement for storage until next year.