

„Bei uns ist immer was los!“

## CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION CUSTOMS / WEIHNACHTSFEIERBRÄUCHE

### exchange of gifts: die Bescherung

#### Presents on Christmas Eve

December 24, Christmas Eve, is the day that Christian children look forward to the most in Germany. The popular tradition of decorating an evergreen tree at Christmas was started in Germany by Martin Luther. Families spend the evening singing carols and exchanging gifts. Some sit down to a huge meal of roast duck or goose. Others just have sausages and potato salad, then enjoy a big Christmas lunch the next day. On Christmas Day, families visit relatives, often staying until the next day.

#### Christmas Eve Finale

Christmas Eve activities are filled with excitement. Children wrap their gifts for their parents, mothers cook the traditional Christmas goose, and fathers are nowhere in sight. Early baths are taken, the best Sunday clothes are put on, and around five in the afternoon the whole family sits down to the Christmas dinner. Goose, Sauerkraut and potato balls constituted our traditional dinner. The dishes are washed in record time, because at six the doors will open to the living room, the magic moment has arrived. Children and other family members line up in front of the door. While they sing Christmas songs, the parents check to make sure all is ready. Then the door is thrown open. The soft glow from the lit Christmas tree remains indelibly etched in my memory. Christmases during my childhood are filled with remembrances of the tree and its reflection in the sliding glass doors of the bookcase; and the gaily decorated plates, one for each child, filled with sweets, nuts and fruits. Only gradually the eyes discover other things in the room. As a rule, none of the children's gifts are wrapped, and each child finds his gift corner quickly. This is the climax for the children.

The adults usually leave the warm living rooms and go to church in the evening later visiting friends on their way home.

“Die Bescherung” or gift giving usually happens on Christmas Eve in Germany. In most homes some members attend a church service called “Christmesse”, where the children of the Parish portray the Christmas story, and, when everyone is home again the “Bescherung” gets underway.

Gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve. The modern counterpart of America's Santa Claus is the German “Weihnachtsmann” (literally: christmas man), in whom the figure of St. Nicholas has merged with older, demonic winter figures such as “Knecht Ruprecht,” formerly believed to accompany St. Nicholas. In some South German regions, the “Christkind” (Christ Child, “Kris Kringle”) is the mysterious gift-bringer.

All the stores close promptly at one in the afternoon on Christmas Eve as everyone hurries home to put on their best clothes and sit down to a magnificent supper. While the children are eating, the parents slip the presents under the tree in the front room.

As soon as the first church bells sound the call to Vespers, an evening prayer service in the Catholic districts of Germany, the head of the house rings a tiny bell to tell everyone that Father Christmas has arrived. The youngest child has the lucky duty of opening the door to the room with all the presents. The resulting scene as everyone crowds around the tree is best left to the imagination!

#### Poll: Gift-Giving Greatest Joy at Christmas

The exchange of gifts, rather than religious observances, appears to be the most important event for West Germans at Christmastime, according to a poll made public recently by the Allensbach (Baden-Württemberg) polling organization. Researchers found that the giving of presents was for most respondents the greatest experience at Christmas. When asked last January by researchers about their most pleasant memory of the previous Christmas, 51 percent of the sample answered that it was “how someone was pleased by a gift from me.” The second most popular answer was the good mood everyone was in, followed by a present which the respondent had received, and the good Christmas meal.