

„Bei uns ist immer was los!“

CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION CUSTOMS / WEIHNACHTSFEIERBRÄUCHE

exchange of gifts: die Bescherung

GERMANY

A scene this is in Germany: Upon the left appears Black Rupert, a grim fiend whom every youngster fears. Beside him is the Christ Child, arrayed in garments white. While St. Peter, with his keys, stands forth upon the right. In the center is St. Nicholas, the Bishop kind and good—Friend of all young people who behave just as they should.

To every house the party comes on Christmas Eve to hear How little boys and girls have acted through the year. For those who've not their parents caused to grieve. Upon the lighted Christmas tree they pretty presents leave; But those of whose behavior they get a bad report. Receive a gift from Rupert, not of a pleasant sort.



Christmas Eve is an important occasion for the German family. All shops, offices, and factories close by noon on December 24th. People rush home to prepare for the evening. This is the time for parents to trim the tree and lay out the presents. The children are usually in another room eagerly waiting to see the decorated tree and presents brought by the *Christkind*. The waiting time is shortened by singing carols. Finally a bell rings, the door to the living room opens, and there stands the tree lit with real candles. But before the children are led to the tables with the gifts, they recite a Christmas poem, studied as a gift for the parents. Then the whole family sings "Silent Night."

Christmas Eve the children of Germany expect the "Christkind" (Christ child), mostly portrayed as a little angel, together with the "Weihnachtsmann" (Santa Claus). They both come on a sleigh pulled by a white horse, or by foot through the deep forests of the country.

On Heiligabend, the night before Christmas, a ritual ceremony takes place. The children wait outside of the room. In the "Christmas room" the tree has already been prepared, adorned with lights, green balls of glass, with strips of tinfoil imitating icicles, with chains of gilt paper; on top is a star of the Annunciation; under the tree or at its side there is often a replica of the manger. But until that evening, the candles are not lit, since the light born into the world by Christ has not arrived. Alongside the tree is the table with the gifts. The room is kept locked while the children await the Gabenbringer, who may be, depending on the region and the customs, the Infant Jesus, an Angel, St. Nicholas or Weihnachtsmann. The father lights the candles inside the room and lays out the gifts. The children are told, he was telling the Christ Child that all was ready. At last the moment arrives: the lights are lit and the door is opened. When the door opens, they are allowed to look at the gifts. After the Bescherung (the exchanging of the gifts), Christmas songs are sung. After the children's excitement dies down, Herr und Frau open their own gifts. Mother brings in cookies, Christmas songs are sung and Christmas records are played. Children often learn Christmas poems and recite them on Christmas Eve. The culminating point on Christmas Day is the great family feast. Care is taken to invite old relatives who would otherwise be left alone, so that on this day they may share in the joy and warmth.