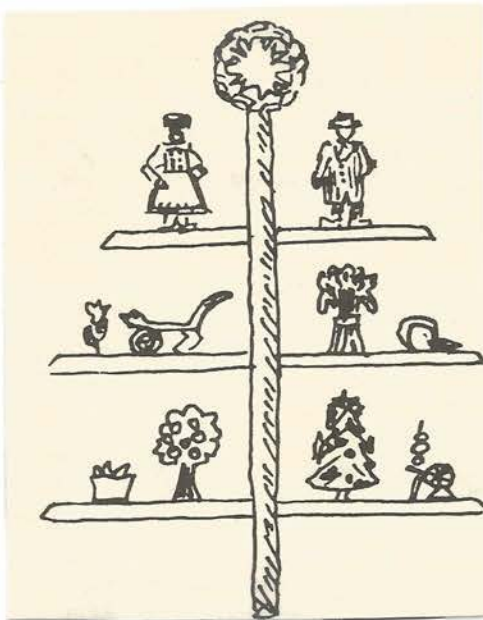


“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

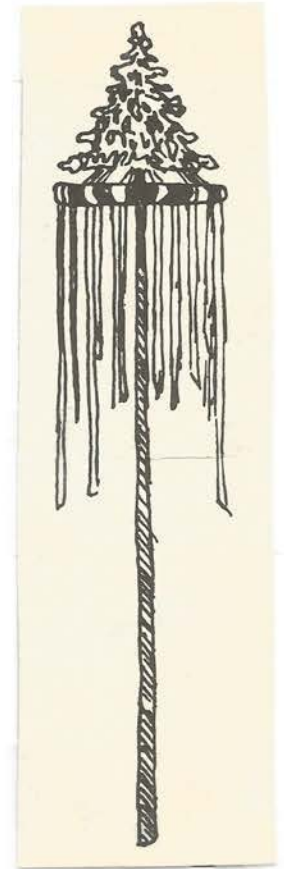
FEIERTAGE UND FESTE IM MAI SITTEN UND GEBRÄUCHE MAIBAUM

May pole: der Maibaum, die Maibäume



MAIFEST IN GERMANY

Traditions of May



They'd Better Guard That Maypole!

The most popular symbol of the “Burschenschaften’s” traditions is the Maypole: a tall tree, usually a spruce, which is felled by members of the group in the forest. Then its branches and twigs are chopped off except for the top. Next the bark is removed from the trunk, and the trunk is carried to the village and set up there, decorated with ribbons and garlands. Often, the maypole is guarded all night by some of the boys since it might be stolen by another village’s “Burschenschaft.” (This is a time-honored prank in many regions.) In some cases, the maypole is set up in front of the village inn. Formerly, “maypoles” in the form of decorated sticks were also planted before the houses of marriageable girls.

Generally, the relations between boys and girls of marriageable age played an important part in the old rural May customs. There are several reasons why a rural village community could not leave the marriages of its young people completely to chance — as it is the rule (at least in principle) in most of modern industrial society. In the feudal society, usually only those men where allowed to marry who could expect to inherit

enough land to support a family. A young man who had permission to get married, however, also had the moral obligation to marry and to have children so that the ownership of the land and with it the fees due to the feudal lord would be certain to be kept up by the next generation.

When farmers till their own lands they see to it that the fields are not divided up and made much smaller by many marriages. Parents therefore tried to find marriage partners for their children who owned as much land as they did. The young men themselves were eager to keep out possible competitors from neighboring villages, in order to protect their own chances for marriage. Countless village celebrations ended in fights caused by this competition.

Only by keeping this in mind can we understand the function of the following custom, which has all but vanished today: the young, unmarried men divided the marriageable girls up among themselves by means of an “auction.” The winner obtained the right to dance primarily with the girl he had “won,” thereby documenting that he intended to enter into (or keep up) closer relations with this girl and to defend his “claim” to her. Such customs are of course only possible in a patriarchal society.