

A CHRISTMAS GIFT TO THE WORLD



Whether they are seeking the exaltation of the spirit or enjoyment of physical man, the Germans seem to get more enjoyment out of Christmas than almost any other people on earth. The German Christmas celebration lasts a full month and a half, from the end of November to mid-January. This festival season is illuminated by joyous carols, colorful fairs, deep devotion to the Christ Child, playful recreations of hellish demons and a parade of seasonal foods and Christmas candies that turns the most dedicated dieter into a bloated *Naschkatze*—snack snatcher.

It isn't enough for a German to have fun during the Christmas season. He insists that everyone share in the joy of the holiday season. Much of Germany is transformed into a vast nationwide block party. Homes are thrown open to friends, relatives and even casual neighbors who come in and out to exchange presents, look at the tree and wish each other well over a glass of punch. Children are loaded down with cookies and gingerbread creations, which are almost always bad for them, but this time mother doesn't complain. After all, she has been baking some of them since July. Young men dress up in outlandish costumes to look like fearsome spirits and scare little children into being good. The children are only too glad to go along because in Germany, even a hobgoblin may have a spare present for a deserving youngster.

No one is left out. Household pets and even farm animals can expect to receive a gaily wrapped Christmas present or a special treat from their owners.

In virtually every German village, city and town there is a *Christkindlmarkt*—Christ Child Market—with brightly lit booths selling fruits, candies, sausages, cookies and toys. Usually these fairs take place in the town

square or in front of the largest church. Automobiles are barred from the market area and children can roam among the stalls to their hearts' content—staring, buying, hoping and, perhaps, dropping a none too subtle hint to their parents about something that particularly catches their eye.

The meanest grump, sulking in his solitary attic, can scarcely escape the cheerful clamor of church bells or the music of street carolers. From the lilting melodies sung by the choirs in the cathedrals of Nuremberg to the thunder of New Year's Eve shotgun fire rattling through the mountains of Berchtesgaden, the whole country is alive with the sounds of Christmas.

The German people—and here we are talking about the centuries old culture of northern and central Europe rather than the present political creation—have had such an abundance of the Christmas spirit that they gave some of it to the rest of the world. The Christmas tree, now an almost universal symbol of the season, is clearly a German creation. The lights and bright ornaments we put on the tree are also gifts to the world from Germany. The gingerbread house, which looks too good to eat but isn't, is a part of the German yuletide tradition. So also are such carols as *Silent Night* and *O Tannenbaum*. Saint Nicholas, much changed from his original folklore origin, is a happy immigrant from Germany.

But for most of us, the most enduring part of the German Christmas heritage is the tree itself. One legend links the birth of the Christmas tree with Saint Boniface an English monk who organized the Christian church in France and Germany during the middle years of the Eighth Century. One Christmas Eve, somewhere in the forests of northern Germany, the missionary came upon a group of worshipers who had gathered around an oak tree to sacrifice the son of their chief, little child Prince Asulf, to the god Thor. Saint Boniface clearly

A brightly decorated tree in Miltenberg.

“...ALL
THE ANIMALS
BEGAN TO
TALK”



An early woodcut depicts the December 6th journey of St. Nicholas through the countryside.

opposed the execution and according to various legends either flattened the mighty oak with one blow of his fist, ordered it chopped down or whacked it with an ax and the wind toppled it. However he managed it, the oak went down and a small fir tree sprang up instantly in its place. Saint Boniface told the awed spectators that this was the Tree of Life, representing Christ.

A Tenth Century legend holds that when Christ was born, all the forest animals began to talk and, despite the darkness and deep snow, every tree blossomed and bore fruit. All the trees paid homage to the newborn King, with the embarrassed exception of a tiny fir tree from the North who was so insignificant in stature and appearance that the other trees tried to hide her. She had just about mustered

a deep-green blush when the Lord intervened—stars fell from Heaven, lighted on the fir's branches and illuminated them like a sparkling diamond necklace.

Another German fir tree legend is that a poor forester welcomed a strange child into his cottage one snowy Christmas Eve, feeding him and putting him up for the night. Next morning the befriended youngster, who was actually the Christ Child, caused a small, glittering fir tree to grow beside the forester's door. The happy host took it inside to become the first Christmas tree.

Martin Luther is the hero of still another Christmas tree legend. One Christmas Eve, while strolling through a snow-covered forest, he was deeply affected by the beauty of the starlight gleaming on the branches of the evergreens. He cut down a small fir tree, took it into his home and placed lighted candles on its boughs so that his wife and children might behold the same heavenly light that had dazzled him. Luther did not mention the incident in his writings, but the legend grew and as a result the strongly Roman Catholic southern portions of Germany resisted using a tree as part of their Christmas observance until about a century ago. Some authorities believe that the Christmas tree made its way to southern Germany by way of America. If that's true, it is fair enough. For the Christmas tree was first brought to the colonies by Hessian soldiers during the American Revolution. Whatever its travels, the Christmas tree is now popular throughout Germany.

The tree, as we know it today, began in the early Middle Ages. Germany, then Catholic, observed Christmas with a religious play presented in village squares or in front of churches. Various called a Paradise play, Mystery or Miracle play, it dramatized the Creation and Fall of Man with the promise of Christ's return. It was presented with only



Children playing with a special Christmas toy, an elaborately carved nutcracker.

one stage “prop”—the *Paradiesbaum* (Paradise Tree)—a fir tree with apples hung on its branches. These plays became irreverent and were banned by the church, but the Paradise Tree lived on in the homes of the faithful. Householders decorated them with small white wafers, symbolic of the Holy Eucharist. These, in turn, gave way to bits of pastry, cookies and cakes; each of them cut to represent some figure or event of the Nativity.

Until the 16th Century, the Christmas tree had a serious rival—the Pyramid—a tripod or pyramidal set of shelves arranged one above the other. Candles were set along the shelf edges and the shelves were filled with small gifts and fruit. Often a crib for the Christ Child was placed at the foot of the Pyramid. Eventually people began to transfer the lights and the crib to the tree itself.

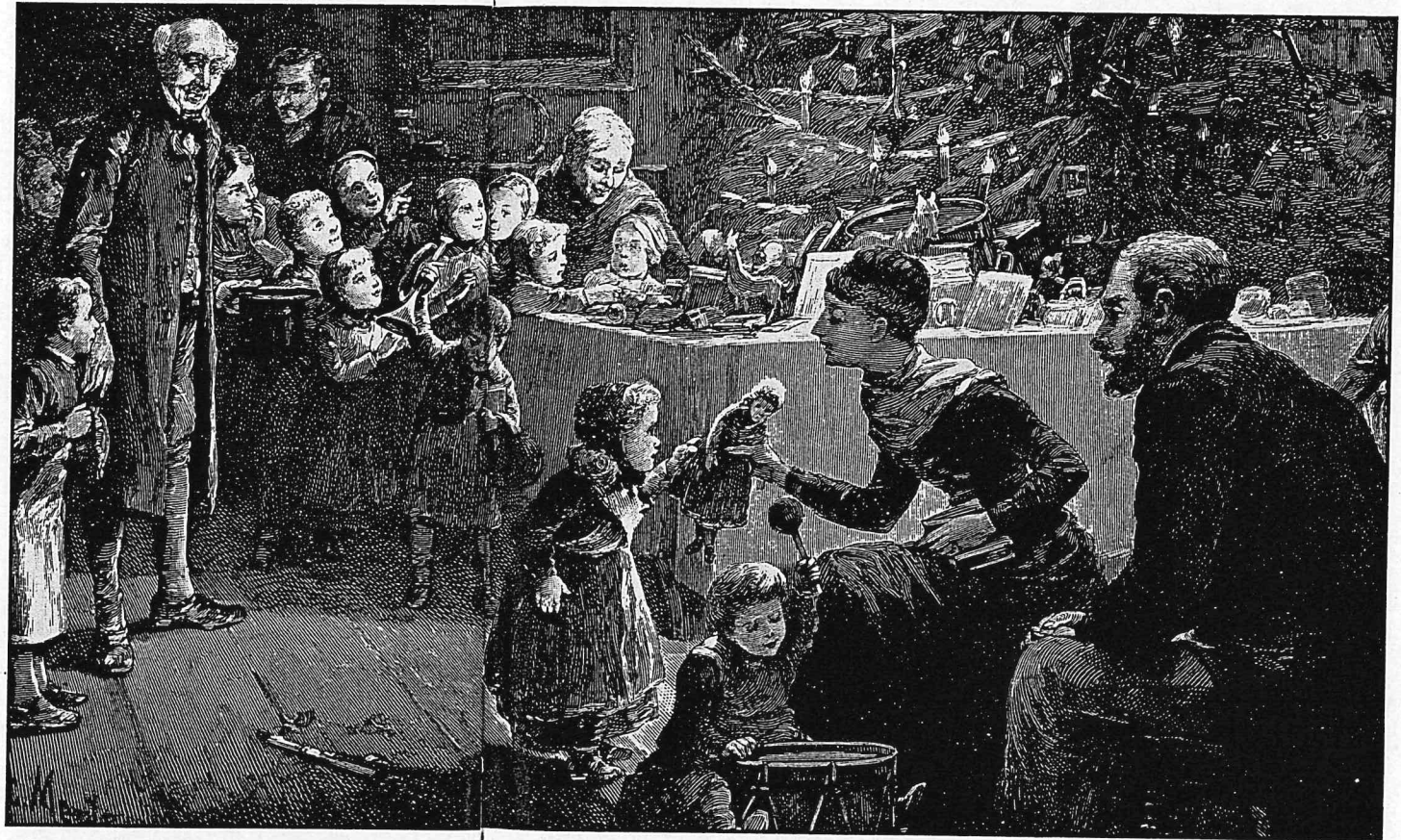
“...GERMANS
INSIST EVERYONE SHARE
IN THE JOY
OF THE SEASON”

Brilliantly decorated and sparkling with lights, the German Christmas tree proceeded to win the world's favor. Prince Albert of Saxony, the husband of England's Queen Victoria, had a tree set up at Windsor Castle in 1841, launching a fashion that spread quickly throughout all of England.

Despite the predominantly happy character of a German Christmas, there are enough villains, demons and spoilsports hovering over the holiday to scare the wits out of a suggestible young child.

Suppose you are a little boy or girl living in Germany, desperately hoping that Saint Nicholas will bring you a gift on Christmas Eve. In the first place you learn that Saint Nick has no reindeer. That's just a silly modern idea cooked up by the Americans or someone else. In the second place even if he did, that is no guarantee he would be bringing you anything you wanted. The German Saint Nicholas is not an eternally jolly fellow like our Santa Claus. Although he is the patron saint of children, he can be a stern figure. Most German legends picture him riding over the countryside on a white pony with two bags. One filled with presents if you have been good and one filled with switches if you have been bad—and *he knows*.

In older days things were easier. Odin, the old Norse Boss of Everything, had an eight-footed horse named Sleipnir that he used to ride through the forests in mid-winter, delivering only presents to people. And that Thor, the Chief Executive of Thunder, drove through the heavens like a celestial hot rod in his golden chariot drawn by two white goats, Cracker and Gnasher. He too was widely known for his lavish hand with gifts. And there was Frau Bertha, also called Hertha, goddess of hearth and home, who could be very generous when she wanted to be.



But all this means little to you, a child of today. These worthy benefactors have long since given up active practice. They don't make house calls any more.

And what have you to replace them? A lineup of villains that would frighten the strongest

youngster — Hans Muff, Knecht Rupprecht, Butz, Hans Tripp, Krampus, Klaubauf, Bartel, Perchta, Buzeberg, Budelfrau, 12 Buttenmandln, Pelznickel, the Berchtenrunner Mob and the notorious Habersack. Each of them has a face that would disgrace a wanted poster.

Germans customarily give presents to all the children on Christmas Eve.

Some may bring you presents, although you might not like the way they are delivered. Some bring you a present of a lump of coal. Some don't bring presents at all. They take them.

“BY THE TIME
YOU GET IT UNWRAPPED,
CHRISTMAS
IS OUT OF SEASON”



Along with the gifts for good children comes the villain to punish the not so very good.

Krampus has a long tail, a red, snake-like tongue and he carries a basket on his back. His basket is where you may wind up on Christmas Eve, if he thinks you deserve it.

What about this *Knecht Rupprecht*? He uses a couple of aliases—*Pelznickel* and *Servant Ruppert*—depending on what part of the country he is in. Sometimes he has a floor-length beard and a fur coat that's eight sizes too big. He's supposed to be Saint Nick's help-

er. If he gives you a bad report, there will be no presents from Saint Nicholas—maybe a switch or perhaps a lump of coal.

The *Berchtenrunner Mob* have you out numbered from the start. They come around to your farm in horrible masks and remind you how much their Queen Bee, *Frau Bertha*, has done for your crops. And what have you done for her lately, they ask while rattling their chains and making wild swings with their pick-axes. No gifts from *them*; they expect you to give them something. Better cough up or forget about Christmas.

How do you cope, for example, with a Christmas spook who is not only invisible but has no name? In spite of these natural limitations, he's a household no-name in northern Germany. He slips up to your house on Christmas Eve, flings open the front door, throws in a gift and is out of sight before you've recovered your wits. This odd spirit is called *Julkapp* or *Klopfelscheit*, but that's no help. Besides Mr. Anonymous always wraps up the gift like a Chinese puzzle. By the time you get it unwrapped, Christmas is out of season.

For many Germans, however, Christmas never seems to be out of season. As early as the previous July, the hard-working *Hausfrau* has begun baking honey and almond cookies called *Lebkuchen* and gingerbread known as *Pfefferkuchen* that will stay fresh until Christmas. Unless they are watched carefully, however, the chances are that these early entries, even when supplemented by hundreds of later morsels such as *Springerle*, little hard cakes with designs on top, will disappear long before.

The German Christmas season itself extends from Saint Andrew's Night (November 30) to the Octave of Epiphany (January 13). In that 45-day span there are 18-calorie-crowded holidays or festivals plus enough subordinate celebrations to wipe out any unwanted intervals of rest. Only the most con-



Today St. Nick is still followed by villains as he makes his rounds checking on the children.

firmed Christmas keeper could hope to make all the stops on this Christmas itinerary. But quite a few of them try.

November 30—Saint Andrew's Night—On this night young girls are supposed to have a dream which will predict the identity of their future husbands. Actually, Saint Andrew is the patron saint of Scotland, but many Germans include it in their Christmas season to get started a day early.

December 1—First Sunday of Advent—The Advent season lasts until Christmas with a new Advent candle being lighted each week. Children open a new window of their cardboard Advent Calendar each day until Christmas and recite a prayer for the day.



A brightly decorated Marzipan soldier is designed to hang from the Christmas tree.

December 4—Saint Barbara's Day—Early-budding cherry branches are cut and put in water beside the stove so they'll bloom by Christmas. The Nuremberg Fair, *Christkindlmarkt*, generally opens around this date and runs until Christmas.

December 6—Saint Nicholas' Day—Fourth Century Bishop of Myra, whose generosity made him the original Santa Claus, comes calling with presents on Saint Nicholas' Eve and his grim assistants may also carry witches for bratty kids. Many fairs open on his day and *Spekulatius* (stamped cinnamon cookies) are passed around quite lavishly.

December 8—Second Sunday of Advent—Friends come calling and join their hosts in

prayers and carols as the second Advent candle is lit in Lutheran homes. Catholics light this candle a day earlier. Baked goods are trotted out and consumed without delay.

December 13—Thousands of Nuremberg youngsters carrying lanterns with candles inside march in procession to the city's most prominent castle, where they sing carols and enact a tableau about the Nativity.

December 15—Third Sunday of Advent—Prayers, carols and celebrations as the third Advent candle is lit.

December 21—Saint Thomas' Day—An especially rich fruitcake is baked and dancing continues far into the night.

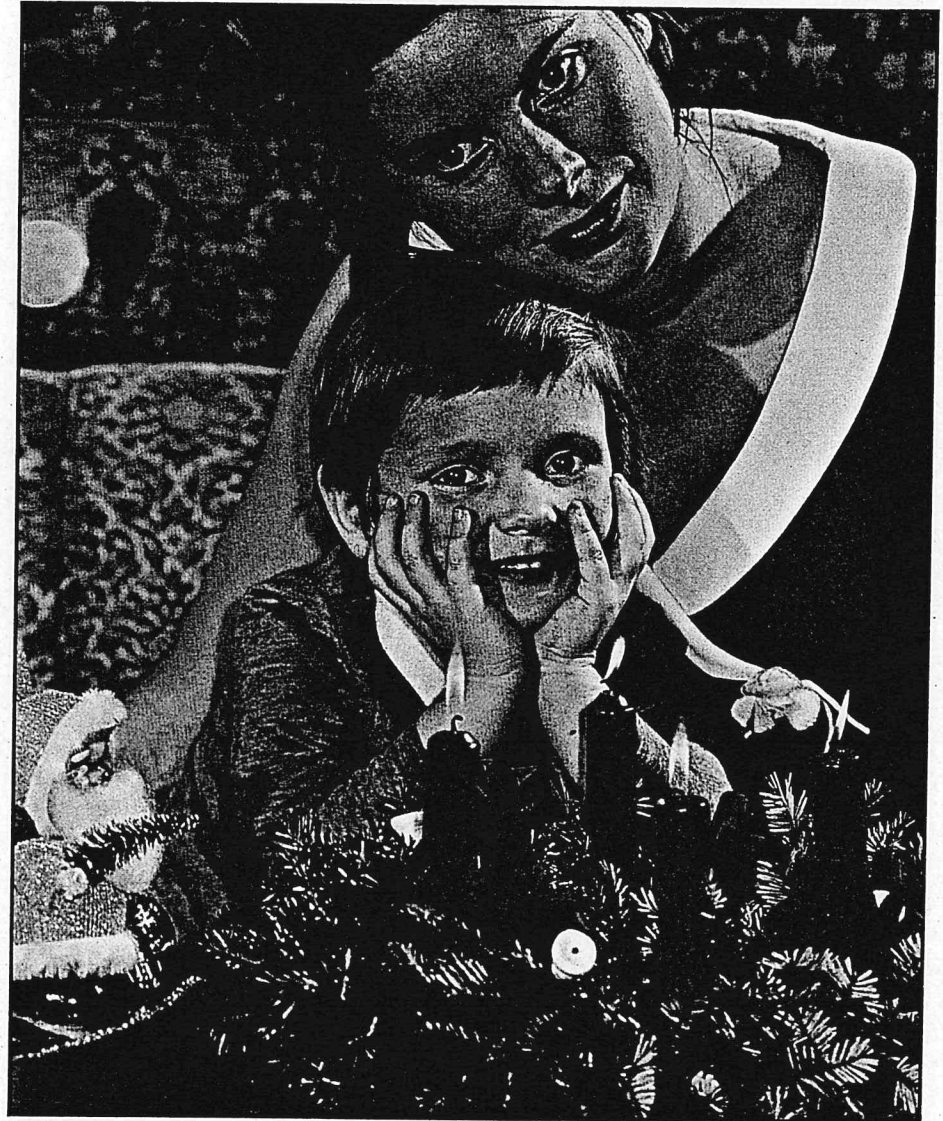
December 22—Fourth Advent Sunday—Fourth and final Advent candle is lit.

December 23—"Eve of the Eve"—The Virgin Mary and flights of angels fly over the land bringing advance word of Christ's birth. Last real working day before Christmas.

December 24—Christmas Eve—Work stops and practically all offices close until December 27. But mother is swamped with baking, present wrapping, tree decorating and children tending. In Westphalia children leave "gimme" notes on windowsills for the Christ Child. He comes and goes undetected, leaving fruits, sweets and presents. As night descends, the tree is lit and the family sings *Stille Nacht* or *O Tannenbaum*. The presents are distributed. In Lorraine the Yule Log is ignited and will burn for three days. In northern Germany there are "Star of Seven" processions with hundreds carrying lighted seven-branch candlesticks as they march through open fields. At *Berchtesgaden* over 1,200 members of holiday shooting clubs climb the mountains wearing ancient costumes and carrying antique firearms. At midnight they will fire many echoing volleys. They'll repeat the sequence on New Year's Eve. Now, it's done for the sheer pleas-

A modern mother and child celebrate the traditional lighting of the Advent Candle.

"...HE COMES
AND GOES UNDETECTED,
LEAVING FRUITS, SWEETS
AND PRESENTS"



“...THE
OLD YEAR
GOES OUT THE
DOOR”



Golden brown and ginger sweet the holiday gingerbread men begin to come to life.

ure of making a thunderous racket; once it was thought to banish evil spirits. Carp is the main dish of the Christmas Eve supper. Many small towns have brass bands to play Christmas tunes. There are pleasure jaunts in brightly-decorated sleighs with Christmas bells jangling. Almost everyone attends midnight church services. The Christ Child in his crib, figures of the Holy Family and carvings of the animals in the Bethlehem stable are displayed under every household Christmas tree. Some of them show superb craftsmanship, exemplifying the essentially religious character of a German Christmas. None of this distracts the

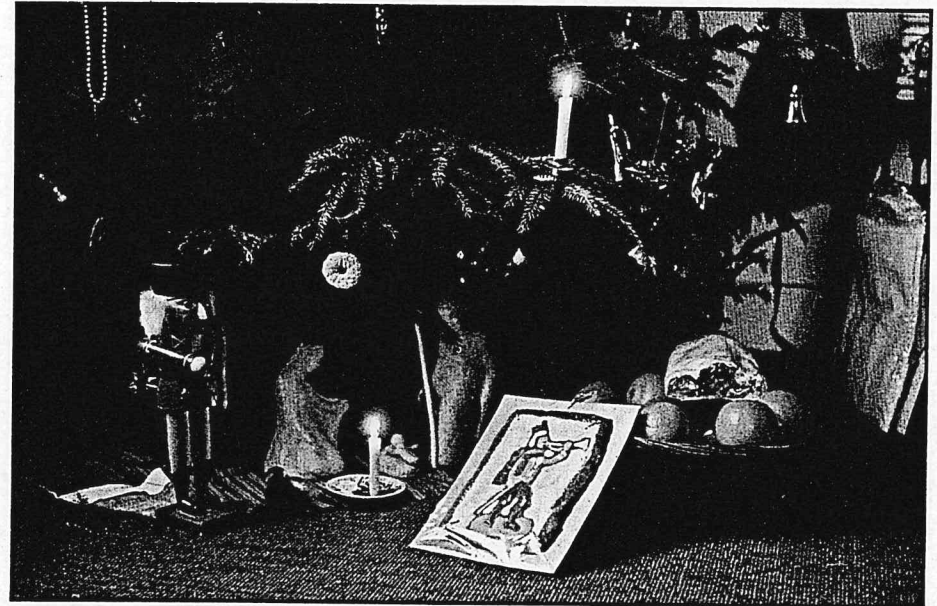


holiday celebrants from consuming an enormous quantity of rich food.

December 25—Christmas Day—Both Catholic and Lutheran families attend daytime church services. In the Austrian Tyrol the Miracle Plays which were once banned by the church are performed. A goose dinner is served. It is primarily a family day with relatives dropping in toward afternoon to view the tree and exchange presents.

December 26—Saint Stephen's Day—He was a patron saint of horsemen and many communities have mounted processions on this day of the three-day “High Christmas” celebration.

December 28—Holy Innocents' Day—Marks the slaughter of children by King Herod. German children presumably square the old account by carrying switches with which they pretend to swat adults and are placated with presents.



Nestled under the tree are several of the delights of a traditional German Christmas.

December 31—New Year's Eve—Restaurants serve carp. Carp is supposed to be lucky, and the diner who saves a few of its shiny scales may anticipate prosperity in the year ahead. *Sylvesterabend*, a hot, spiced punch, is served with *Pfannkuchen* (doughnuts). In Wuppertal, the favored pastry of the day is *Balbauschen* (fried cake stuffed with raisins and currants). There are early evening church services throughout Germany followed a little later by universal merriment. By custom Lower Rhinelanders play cards until midnight, then everyone throws down his cards and shouts “*Prosit Neujahr!*” (Happy New Year!) In most communities the residents poke their heads out the windows as midnight nears. At the first peal of the New Year bells, there are kisses and New Year's greetings. In a few

villages the night watchman pauses to recite this old verse:

“In the name of the Lord
The Old Year goes out the door.
This is my wish for all of you:
Peace everlasting, and
Praise to God, our Lord.”

January 6—Epiphany, also known as Twelfth Night or the Festival of the Three Kings—Many high-spirited parties highlight this day. The guest who discovers a bean in his portion of cake becomes King of the Feast and may issue all manner of ridiculous orders. In southern and western Germany, salt and pieces of chalk are consecrated. Salt is for the animals to lick. Chalk is to write the names of

“...NO ONE
IS LEFT OUT”



A young girl happily marks off the days until Christmas on the Advent Calendar.

the Three Kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, who visited the infant Jesus, and to ask their protection against fire and flood. In Pottenstein, Bavaria, the Procession of Light winds through the town. Bells are rung, bonfires lighted on the mountaintops and the town castle is floodlighted. Star shells are fired and a church service concludes the celebration.

January 13—Octave of Epiphany—Groups of four boys each march in the streets of southern Germany. One carries a lighted star on a pole and the others are dressed as the Three Kings. They may carry a crib to leave with some needy family. Along their way, they sing “Star Songs” and on that note the Christmas season melodiously departs.

No city or region of Germany has a monopoly on Christmas, but perhaps the oldest and



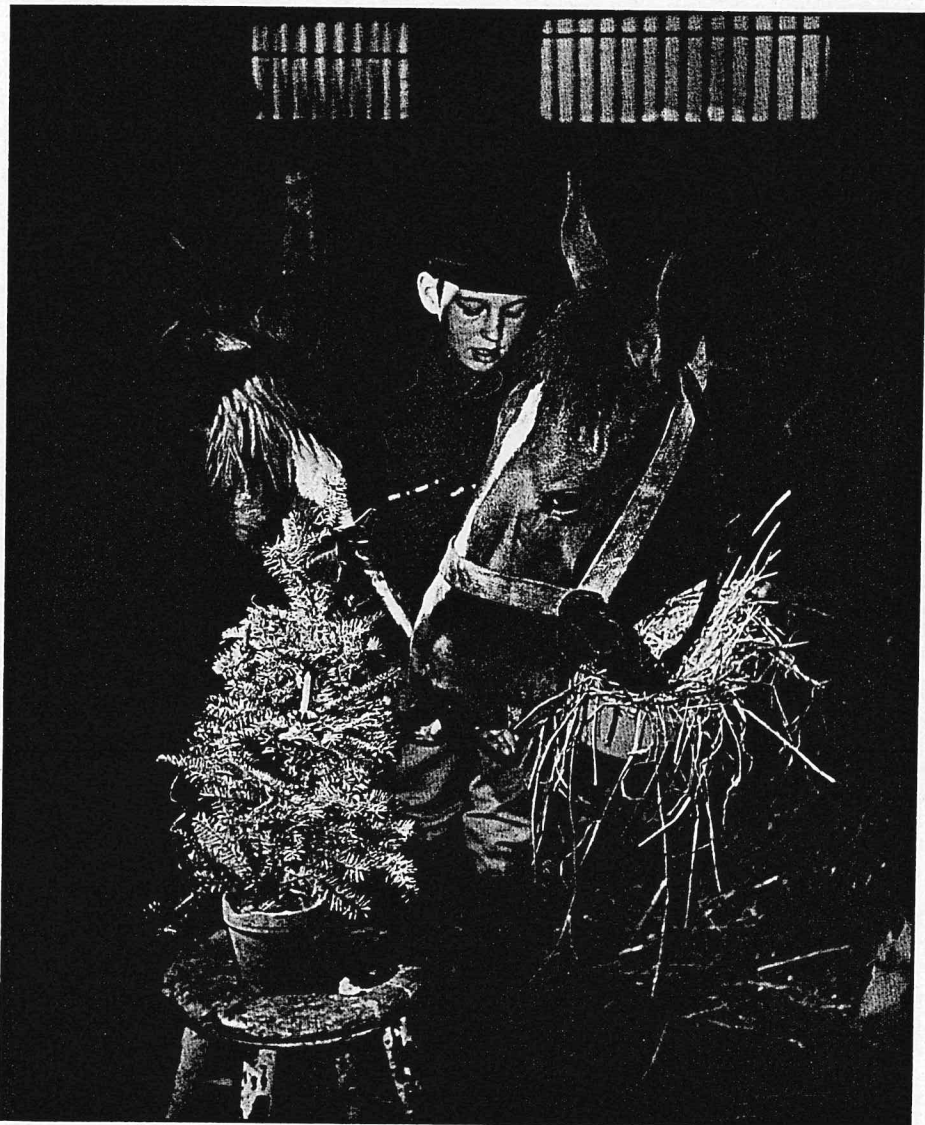
Marking the coming of the Christmas season marksmen sound their guns. Right, a boy shares Christmas with his horses.

most impressive of its public Yuletide observances is the Nuremberg Fair or *Christkindlmarkt*. Nuremberg itself is a bundle of contradictions: nine centuries old, home of the German toy-making industry, quaint and medieval; it is also a highly-sophisticated industrial city of nearly 500,000 people. The old-fashioned side of the city is expressed in the Fair held annually in the Main Market Square. Brightly painted horse-drawn coaches rattle through the streets daily carrying passengers to and from the Fair. It is easy to see why visiting monarchs and their entourages once came from all parts of Europe to view the Nuremberg Fair.

Early in December two trumpeters in medieval costumes and flanked by two angels appear on the gallery of the Church of our Lady which overlooks the square. They are accompanied by a Christ Child figure and invite all to attend the Fair. There is an old tradition that the Christ Child once visited the Fair and delivered presents to the faithful.

Toymakers and woodcarvers produce their finest work for the Fair and only articles directly related to Christmas are sold there.

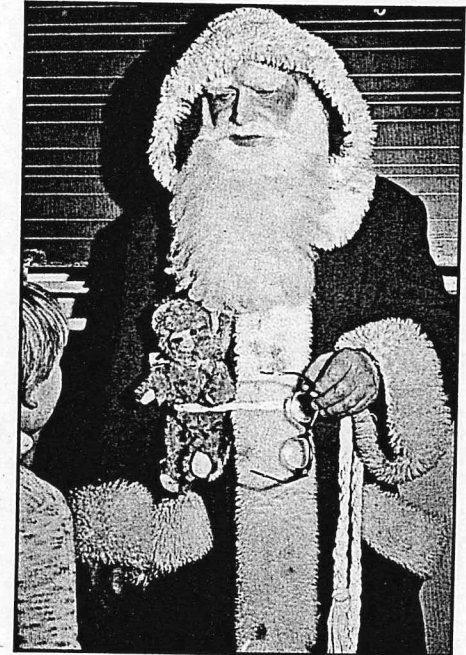
Among the items you can scarcely overlook are the tinsel “Angel Dolls” sold at many



“...CELEBRATION
STARTS
AT DAYBREAK”



The trumpeters of Munich herald the season amidst the traditional symbols. Left, a wooden angel beckons. Right, St. Nick talks with a German schoolboy.

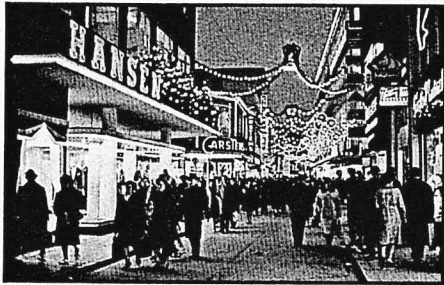


booths. These have a 300-year history. The first of them was made by a heartbroken father honoring the memory of his beloved, only daughter. There's a happier connotation to the "Little Prune People"—edible dolls with feet, legs and arms of prunes and raisins, a large fig for a body and a walnut for a head. Cookies and cakes formed into animals, dwarfs, stars and other shapes share the food booths with *Kringel*, semi-transparent cookies in figure-eight shape so that they can be hung on a Christmas tree. *Lubecker Marzipan* is a candy that imitates fruit and vegetables so closely that first time viewers are often fooled. Tidbits such as roast sausage, grilled herring, hard spicy peppermint and frosted cookies blend with other fragrant foods to produce an intoxicating aroma. It is no place for a picky eater.

For most modern German families who keep Christmas in the traditional manner, the celebration starts at daybreak on December 24. The children are shoved out of the house

to play or go caroling in the neighborhood. Back in the house, the room where the Christmas tree, secretly stolen into the house a few nights before, stands is locked to all but Mother who traditionally decorates the tree by herself. If she is very traditional, she clips wax candles on first. Then gilded nuts and red apples. Candies wrapped in fancy tinsel paper twinkle from deep within the boughs. Then the magnificent hand-blown glass ornaments which have been passed down for generations are hung. Paper chains and angel hair add their special magic. Then the special cookies mother has been baking for weeks especially for the tree and the *Springerle*, each with a special Yuletide symbol or figure on it, are placed on the tree. To finish off the tree she puts on gingerbread figures and cookies.

“...THE
ENTIRE ROOM
TAKES ON THE AIR
OF A FANTASY”



Holiday decorations light up the streets of Cologne as a family, right, enjoys one of the many feasts of Christmas.

At the base of the tree goes the Creche, usually a family heirloom of figures in porcelain or wood carved hundreds of years ago. And then the presents go nearby the tree next to a figure of the *Christkind* (Christ Child) dressed in white robes wearing a crown of gold.

The entire room takes on the air of a fantasy—with *Lebkuchen* (honey cakes) and gingerbread houses and prune people everywhere. And the smells which have filled the house for weeks—the cinnamon, the cloves, the vanilla and the ginger—mingle with the aroma of the fir tree to mix an even more magical air and heighten the excitement.

At six PM, to the sound of tinkling bells, the doors are thrown open and the family is invited in to view the tree for the first time. Before the presents are opened, father reads the story of the birth of Christ. Then, after much ripping and tearing at paper, all the presents are opened and the time for Christmas Eve dinner has finally arrived.

As the family gathers around the table to enjoy a feast of *Karpfen* (carp, a traditional favorite) and butter, whipped cream and horseradish, special red cabbage with bacon, they retell again the miracle of the coming of Christ. When dessert arrives, usually a specially decorated honey cake or *Stollen* pastry, the children begin to sing carols.

