

CLEVELAND, OHIO

HOLIDAY, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 25, 1988

THE PLAIN DEALER

LIVING

2 lands, 1 spirit of Christmas

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Kunzel is an American who has lived in Germany for the past 14 years.

Around the end of November each year, my children start asking me if we're going to celebrate Christmas the American way or German-style this year. Our two boys, having been raised in Germany by a very American mother (especially where tradition is concerned) and a German father, have had the opportunity to observe firsthand the traditions of both countries.

After much discussion, we usually end by being democratic and taking a vote. The first year we voted, I was sure that "German-style" would win since it presents the obvious advantage of allowing everyone to open all the presents on Christmas Eve rather than having to wait until the next morning. This custom surely must have been designed with children in mind.

I thus felt the need to hold a lengthy oratory about the excitement of hanging up the stockings by the chimney with care, listening all night for the prancing and pawing of each little hoof and creeping down the stairs while the house was still dark to see if they could get a peek at the jolly old elf.

It was obvious that my arguments were well-anchored in literary history. I pulled my trump card — German-style Christmas means no stockings to be hung. American tradition won out that year.

Now, many Christmases have come and gone and I no longer have to fear that if the boys ever spend Christmas in America they won't know who Rudolph is. It's rooted in them just as deeply as the German spirit of Christmas is, and I've come to appreciate the advantages of both ways to celebrating.

For me, having grown up in the U.S., Christmas will always be a season to be jolly. It conjures up memories of caroling from house to house, all decorated to the hilt, huge festive parties, afternoons spent baking and decorating cookies, making and wrapping presents and an overall feeling of peace and good will that almost everyone seemed to have, whether friends or strangers. Certainly there are Scrooges to be found, but they kind of got lost in the ebullient Christmas spirit of the majority.

Aside from the commercialism of the Christmas season — which is pretty much the same in Germany as in the U.S. — the word which comes to most German's minds when asked about the Christmas season is solemn. Christmas is not a time for bright colored lights and songs about mommy kissing Santa Claus. It's a time for candles and traditional religious music.

The biggest exception to this rule occurs on Dec. 6, St. Nikolaus Day. It is said that Nikolaus, a 6th-century bishop, performed good deeds, especially helping children in need. Therefore, on this day, Nikolaus appears with a sack of apples, nuts, tangerines and other treats for all the good little boys and girls. Whereas American children never actually get to see the real Santa Claus, Nikolaus often makes house calls here in the late afternoon of the 6th.

My first encounter with him was when we were invited to a friend's house to await his coming. After a long and suspenseful wait, we heard three loud knocks at the door. In came Nikolaus, dressed in his bishop robes with a tall hat, a long scepter and a golden book in his hand. He asked the children to sing him a song and then called them to him one by one.

From his book he read a few important facts about each child, the things they had done well throughout the year and the things which could stand improvement. The children were all still young enough to be amazed that Nikolaus knew so much about them. After giving each child a small bag of treats, he told them the story of Christmas.

"Do you know why Joseph and Mary had to sleep in the manger?" Nikolaus inquired.

"Yes," replied 4-year-old Stefan. "Mary was going to have a baby that night and the innkeeper said if she stayed in the hotel the baby might cry and wake up the other guests."

Even Nikolaus had a hard time keeping a straight

face at that point. For the children who are not lucky enough to be able to have Nikolaus as their guest, the custom is to put a boot outside their door before going to sleep. In the morning, it is filled with goodies.

The Christmas season in Germany officially begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. This is called the first Advent and is celebrated by lighting the first of four candles on the advent wreath. The tradition of the advent wreath is relatively new, having gotten its start in the middle of the last century. A wreath is typically made of spruce and decorated with ribbons, pine cones and tiny ornaments. It is either placed on a table or hung flat from the ceiling.

On each of the following Sundays of advent, one more candle is lit until all four are burning during the last week. Sunday afternoons is a time of getting together for coffee and Christmas cookies. Sometimes carols are sung, but normally the texts must be handed out as most people don't know the words by heart.

Another advent tradition is the calendar. This is hung up on the last day of November and has 24 pockets for small presents or candies. The children are allowed to open one each day, helping them to endure the endless wait until Christmas.

Just as American children often peek behind the windows of their paper advent calendars ahead of time, most young German children also find it difficult to resist the temptation to see what is in the other pockets. The difference is that whereas the windows can be closed again without mother noticing, it's impossible to hide the fact that more than one piece of candy has been eaten.

During the Christmas season, *Christkindlmarkts* (Christmas markets) can be found in all the larger towns and cities throughout Bavaria. The numerous stands at these markets offer Christmas decorations and ornaments of every size, shape and material in addition to gift items and toys.

Since the markets are always outdoors, the stands selling steaming red wine or children's punch, hot sugar-coated almonds, Lebukchen spice cookies and warm sausages are always a welcome oasis during a cold December shopping spree. Many of the markets close each evening with choral groups performing Christmas songs.

Christmas day here in Germany is actually on Christmas eve. That is when the tree is brought inside and decorated and the presents are exchanged. The children are sent to the kitchen or to their rooms for several hours during the afternoon to wait for the Christkind, or Christ child. During that time, the father brings the tree inside, decorates it and places all the presents under it.

Most families still use real candles on the tree. Although the atmosphere created by a tree full of burning candles on a late December afternoon is something everyone should experience at least once, that once was enough for me. My nerves have now forced me to return to the traditional American string of electric lights which can be left on even when one goes out of the room for a few minutes.

I always had the feeling that by the time I got the last candle lit, it was almost time to put the first one out.

When the candles are all burning, the Christkind rings a small bell and then disappears. This is the signal for the children to come into the room. For them, the tree as well as the presents are all brought by the Christkind.

After the gifts are opened, the family sits down to a traditional Christmas supper, usually carp. Many families attend a Christmas Mass before retiring.

The next two days, the 25th and 26th, are holidays spent with the family. The mother spends most of her time preparing festive meals, the children playing with their new toys. One stays close to home, perhaps going for a walk, but not visiting anyone. I, and I think most of the Germans, are glad when the 27th comes around and people seem to come back to life.

Since all the stores close at noon on the 24th and reopen on the 27th, it is easy to imagine the crowds trying to buy essentials such as milk and bread. A few years ago, the 27th fell on a Sunday, so the stores were closed from noon on Thursday until Monday morning. No convenience stores here. If the law says that stores must close at a certain time, they all close at that time, no exceptions.

So back to the choice we face each year — shall we have a German or an American celebration?

Although the American Christmas is the one which has always been traditional for me, after spending so many Christmases here in Germany the German celebration has also become a part of our family tradition. After all, tradition is no more than what has always been done. And what has been done in our family ever since we've lived here is to talk about and try to appreciate the heritage and sentiments of both cultures.

So when the discussion starts again this year at the end of November whether to celebrate Christmas in the American way or the German way, the answer will be clear. Christmas is within us and we'll celebrate it in the only way we know how — with all the feelings and memories we've stored up from Christmases past.

Whether the presents are opened on the 24th or the 25th, whether the stockings are hung on Christmas eve or Nikolaus comes three weeks earlier is secondary. Important is that we learn to understand others who are different from us and accept their feelings, traditions and views as being as real and important to them as our own are to us.

This is as true of the different Christmas celebrations as it is of all other religious or political differences. Only through this understanding can we achieve a lasting peace on earth and true good will toward all.