

Dezembererlebnisse in Deutschland (Experiencing December in Germany – by Lucari Jordan 2015)

The Advent season, the four weeks leading up to “Heiligabend” (Holy Evening or Christmas Eve), is something very special in Germany. Many families set up an “Adventskranz” (Advent wreath) on the first Advent Sunday. The original “Adventskranz” was invented in Hamburg 175 years ago; it had 28 candles, 4 big white ones for the Sundays and little ones in-between for the workdays. Nowadays most families use only four candles, one for each of the Advent weeks. Traditional families gather around the wreath on each Advent Sunday to light the next candle and sing Christmas songs. My host family is not the type to sing, but we light the candles whenever we play “Siedler von Catan”. Our “Adventskranz”, made of real branches from an evergreen tree growing next to the front door, does not have needles and begins to brown as it dries out. However, Simon invigorates it with freshly cut material. The “Weihnachtsbaum” (Christmas tree) is not put up and decorated until “Heiligabend”; Wolfgang has planned to buy one the day before.



Through my American family with German roots, I am familiar with the “Adventskalender” tradition. For years, my brothers and I would each get an imported one with a colorful Christmas scene and 24 windows filled with small chocolates. It placated us during the waiting period until “Weihnachten”; we were only allowed to open one window each day, starting on December 1st though some of the younger family members with an awfully sweet tooth couldn’t keep their hands away from those ever so enticing little windows. It’s really amazing for me now to see all kinds, shapes and colors of “Adventskalender” in the German stores. The image above shows my host family’s current “Adventskalender”.



On December 5, Wolfgang, Simon and I took a train to Nürnberg in Bavaria to experience the world-famous “Christkindlesmarkt” (literally the Christ Child’s market). The “Deutsche Bahn” (German Railroad) offered us a special deal: I could ride free of charge on a companion ticket. -- The Alps rising to the south and the medieval Imperial Castle on top of the Old Town hill provide a beautiful backdrop for this Christmas market which is among the oldest of hundreds of Christmas markets all over Germany and boasts 180 red and white booths. These Christmas markets have differing names wherever you go, for example: Lichterglanz, Christkindelsmarkt, Weihnachtsmarkt, Strietzelmarkt, but the “Christkindlesmarkt” in Nürnberg is special because a child from the area is chosen to play the “Christkind” and give a speech to the people from the tower of the “Frauenkirche” (Church of our Lady).



Aromas of “Glühwein” (“glowing” spiced mulled wine), “Lebkuchen” (a special kind of gingerbread), “Gebrannte Mandeln” (caramelized almonds), “Plätzchen” (cookies), and Bratwurst fill the crisp air. Visitors can purchase traditional, handcrafted gifts and wonderful woolens; mass-produced wares are not allowed. I bought myself a cozy scarf to keep me warm; the hot “Glühwein” spiced with cinnamon, cloves and cardamom also did a great job in cheering up the mood and perhaps even loosening my already self-animated tongue. Merchants charge a 2 Euro deposit for each ceramic cup, which most tourists like myself choose to keep because they make beautiful, inexpensive souvenirs. Another popular memento, rather unique to the southern states, is the “Zwetschgenmännla” (little doll made of nuts and dried prunes).

Wolfgang felt confined in the crowded Nürnberg “Christkindlesmarkt”. He prefers the more organized and spread-out “Weihnachtsmärkte” of which there are usually several in larger cities. On our way back from Nürnberg, we stopped over in Hannover and admired the four-story “Weihnachtspyramide”.



There's, of course, also a "Weihnachtsmarkt" in Nienburg, just a minute on foot from Albert-Schweitzer-Schule. I must admit I've already spent too many euros for those delicious crêpes I find absolutely irresistible. Mmh, ...I have to make sure that my wonderful beach body will be preserved and won't expand into a round crêpe-like form. I have never needed to diet, but German butter and Christmas food may change that ...Perhaps that will be my New Year's resolution, to abstain from butter, beer, and "Gebäck" (baked goods other than bread).

I'm looking forward to traveling to Glückstadt on the Elbe River, about 50 km north of Hamburg, and spending the Christmas holidays with my grandmother's youngest sister, her husband and the family of her youngest son. When I was three, six and twelve, I visited Glückstadt and my relatives in summertime and wonder how my memories will compare to the present-day little harbor town of 13,000 inhabitants and many picturesque winter views.

Let me conclude with a photo that one of my Southern German relatives took recently of a gigantic candle at a Christmas market in the state of Hessen. The German greeting translates approximately to: "We wish you a Merry Christmas and the best for 2016 as well as happiness, contentedness and above all good health!"

