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Christmas and New Year in Switzerland

by NINA PFAENDLER

COMPARED with the Anglo-Saxon Christmas, the Swiss Yuletide is a quiet, introverted affair. No other festival of the year is so intimately connected with, and restricted to, the family.

Let us, for a moment look in one or two of these Swiss families at home.

She was as pretty as a picture, this tiny white-haired great-grandmother and she laughed so merrily as she told me of her childhood spent in the Jura mountains, those Christmas memories of long ago!

"There was always snow and ice in the Jura at Christmas, we could count on that," she told me.

On Christmas Eve, all the children of the village assembled at 5 o'clock, and with their teachers marched up to the church.

"How we stamped our feet to knock the snow off our boots," she said, "Never did we stamp so hard or make so much noise as at the church door on Christmas Eve". Into church they went, there was the lighted tree, and they sang the Christmas songs, said a little prayer and heard once again the story of the birth of the Holy Child in the stable at Bethlehem. Then came the great moment for which they had all been waiting, as they left the church, each child received an orange, a book of stories, and a little cake. If you were of a fanciful turn of mind, you might think these little cakes resemble in shape a pair of animals' horns!

Was it not the humble ox and the little ass who first paid homage to the new born child? They had nothing to give, but breath to warm the cold night air. (Who does not remember the comfortable feeling on entering into a stable on a winter's day?) We shall come across these little cakes on our journey about Switzerland on this Christmas Eve.

Now we will pay a short visit to the tiny village of Comprovasco in the Valle di Blenio.

Two little boys stand at the door of the Priest's house—Yes, the Father was ready waiting for them. Guiseppe and his brother had to go round with the Priest to carry Holy Water with which he will bless every house in the village. They also carried a basket into which the good lady of each house would put a small gift for the Priest and something also for the little servers. The gifts were chestnuts, nuts, cheese, little cakes and sometimes a few francs, only rarely a five-franc piece! The tour of the village took only a few hours. Like the little girl in the Jura-home, they all go, the door is shut and they disappear into the life of their families.

Nowadays, cinemas, theatres and nightclubs, close on the afternoon of the 24th December for a full forty-eight hours. When they open again on St Stephen's day it is to great bustling crowds. Two days are spent at home and the third is "Public celebrations days".

Praying before merrymaking is the rule for this and other religious festivals which all culminate in a "second holiday", 26th December at Christmas, Monday at Easter and Whitsun.

On Christmas Eve, the church bells only are allowed to break the silence. Their powerful chimes call all to the midnight church services. The famous bells of Zurich have been trained on harmony for hundreds of years. As they slowly blend into one single symphonic concert, their awe inspiring sounds fill every nook and space in the wide valley from which the city gracefully reaches up to the surrounding hills. The bells of Zurich have carried their message around the world. They have been heard in a great many radio broadcasts and on gramophone records.

In the Valais, one of Switzerland's quaintest mountain Cantons, the bell-ringing tradition becomes a bell-ringing competition on Christmas Eve. Each community in each valley wants to show it has the most beautiful bells and tries to out-ring its rivals!

After midnight mass everyone gathers round the family table for a frugal supper of "Ringli"—king-sized doughnuts and hot chocolate. In the mountain villages of the Valais, the New Year is greeted by groups of singers passing from house to house.

Elsewhere in Switzerland, carolling under the stars is typical of ancient Christmas traditions. Called "Sternsingen", star singing, this colourful custom was revived several years ago, particularly in Lucerne and nearby villages.

The "stars" which lead the procession, quite obviously are symbols of the trail-blazing star of Bethlehem. Heading their followers are the Holy Three Kings who are sometimes accompanied by hoards of grotesquely disguised figures. These eerie characters are reminiscent of pre-Christmas demons haunting the trail of the Three Holy Kings with heathen music produced by all kinds of noisemaking instruments. At one hamlet in the Canton of Grison, even a pagan sword dance still besets the Three Holy Kings pageant as a remnant of primeaval worship.

The "Christkind" and Christmas in the woods. Let us go and see a much more peaceful Christmas visitor, the "Christ Child" in person.

Yes, the very symbol of the Holy night, so dear to the Swiss children, still makes its appearance in and around the village and castle of Hallwil. It is personified by a girl in snow-white garb, her little face veiled and her head crowned in gold and sparkling

gems. She is accompanied by children dressed in white, following her on her calls at every house. Baskets of gifts and colourful lanterns are carried through the village and the tinkling of a silvery bell announces the heavenly visitor and her companions. As soon as the "Christkind" enters a house, the Christmas tree is lit and the gifts distributed to the children. The "Christkind" shakes hands with everyone present, while her little attendants sing carols, and on they go from house to house, till all the children of the village have had a visit from the "Holy Child".

Switzerland's Boy Scouts and Girl Guides have set an example for celebrating Christmas out of doors, an example which has been followed by many other groups from ski clubs to adult organizations. The idea is to meet under a genuine Christmas tree in the natural setting of a wintery forest. Somewhere in the woods a spruce of fur is picked and decorated on the spot. In the evening it is not only the tree that is ablaze with scores of candles, but the path from the edge of the woods to the meeting place, is festively marked by burning candles on twigs and bushes to direct the celebrants.

Thousand-year-old cakes. One of the strangest of these little cakes is the "Tirggel" of Zurich, which is said to derive from the early Germanic sacrificial cake. These golden brown flat cakes originally featured animal designs as token of offerings. Evidence of the pre-Christian origin is brought by its ingredients which are flour and honey without the addition of sugar. It therefore dates back to an era long before sugar became known in Europe. The cleverly carved wooden moulds in which the dough is baked have seen many artistic improvements in the course of centuries. Although still remaining the main feature, the sacrificial animals were partly replaced by ornamental cartoons, like illustrations of the Christmas legend and heroic deeds of "William Tell", heraldic emblems and all kinds of rhymed nonsense. The "Tirggel", in its more or less sophisticated version, has kept its traditional place under Zurich's Christmas trees up to this day.

In many parts of Switzerland, the most important food at Christmas is the "Guezli", home-made biscuits of great variety.

Many districts have their own specialities such as the "Basler Leckerli" and the "Berner Leckerli". Every year a good friend sends me, at Christmas time, a box of "Toggenburger Zungli" and sometimes a beautifully decorated "Biber". This is always given pride of place on our table for my family still keep the good old Swiss custom of coming home for the tree, the present giving and the Christmas feast. The family is home, the door is shut, at the foot of the tree of lights, is the crib, the heart of Christmas Eve.

—The Swiss Observer