

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DR-6
A Christmas Interlude

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New York 36, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Austria," wrote an Austrian friend who has lived the last twenty years in America, "is the land where they know how to celebrate Christmas." Muddled a little this year by the growing traffic problem, by relative prosperity and some accompanying complacency, by imported commercialism, and by unseasonably warm and wet weather, this Christmas spirit in Vienna glimmered less brightly and less spontaneously than in 1953, when I was last here. The Viennese were buying much more, but feeling somewhat less.

1953 had been the first "really good Christmas" since before the war, perhaps since before the first war. The year before the currency, after seven disheartening years of inflation, reform and devaluation, had at last been stabilized (it has not budged since), and postwar recovery was paying its first visible dividends. The occupation - and the Russians - were still here, inspiring in defiance a high morale, determination, and enthusiastic self-confidence in the Austrians. The city was gay, in a defiant sort of way, but astonished local citizens told me it was the first genuine gayety they could remember in a long time.

In 1958 Vienna has caught up with the Western world. Christmas season here begins officially after the Krampus festivities on St. Nicholas' Day, December 6th, but this year the shops had decorated and were advertising before the last week in November, and I saw my first Viennese Santa Claus on the 30th. One heard familiar grumbles about "how they're ruining Christmas with all this commercialism."

Still, Christmas remains basically Austrian, which is to say German with local variations. Santa Claus may walk the streets and Christmas trees in shops may be electrically illuminated, but such foreign innovations do not enter the homes. There electric lights on Christmas trees still are considered a sacrilege (several Austrians used this precise word), and Christmas gifts are generally brought by the Christchild. (The local Santa Claus, called the Weihnachtsmann, or Christmas Man, does help with the presents, to be sure, but seems a closer relative of the Russian Grandfather Frost or the English Father Christmas than of the Americans' mongrel Santa-St. Nick.)

St. Nicholas himself is ineligible for the job of giftbringing because he has already had his day, his own day, the sixth of December. But even there, poor soul, he has been almost crowded from the scene by his more colorful companion, the Krampus, whose ori-

gins are pre-Christian and who makes the day a sort of German Hallowe'en. The Krampus is a black devil with a red face, horns and a long tail. He and the old saint of Bari go around together on the Saint's day, the Krampus with a switch and a rattling length of chain, Nicholas with a bag of gifts. Children who have been bad get switched, those who have been good get gifts. Alas, things have got a bit confused over the centuries, and these days it seems to be the Krampus who brings gifts as well as switchings. The Saint has in some instances disappeared altogether, and no one seems to find it inappropriate that the gifts are from the devil. To right the balance a little, the gifts are traditionally only trifles - like a bag of sweets - or practical jokes.

After the Krampus has left, Christmas can properly begin. In every town a Christkindmarkt (Christchild market) opens, where toys and small gifts can be bought from booths in a carnival atmosphere. The Vienna Christkindmarkt, in front of the old Royal stables (now the Vienna fair palace), proudly announces that it is 660 years old, but it has gone sadly downhill in recent decades. Today it is a series of uniformly shoddy booths exhibiting uniformly shoddy cheap manufactured goods, without either atmosphere or real bargains.

The main shopping street in Vienna, the Mariahilferstrasse that links the inner city with the west railway station and Schönbrunn Palace beyond, is decorated with colored lights overhead, like an American city, as are one or two other streets. On the last two Sundays before Christmas, known respectively as Silver and Golden Sunday, the city shops remain open, and it is then that crowds from city and province converge in earnest on the Mariahilferstrasse. This year it poured rain on Silver Sunday, so when the sun came out brightly on Golden Sunday, city police and shopkeepers braced themselves for the rush. Extra traffic patrolmen were on duty, and at five strategic intersections along the Mariahilferstrasse policemen armed with walkie-talkie radios prepared to control the mob. It materialized ten thousand strong (on that one street), which the press found disappointingly small, but I thought almost impenetrable. After a two-hour struggle I emerged with three toys for friends' children, a headache and sore feet.

If the shopping crowd was relatively small in numbers, it was big in spending, and Vienna reports a record Christmas season. The shoppers may not look as cheerful as they did in 1953, pushing through Vienna's two department stores and thousands of shops, but they have much more money and are spending it.

Vienna seems to have more bookshops in every street than any city I have ever visited, and these, too, have done a thriving business. Top of the best-seller list: Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago in a new German translation. ("The Christmas whirlwind will let loose again in January," one bookstore owner told a Vienna newspaper, "for then all the people who received Doctor Zhivago two or three times will want to exchange their surplus copies!") Close behind it came two books by the local cartoonist Ironimus, one of them a volume of caricatures of Federal Chancellor Raab,

entitled Julius (DR-5). The German Fritz Habeck and A.J. Cronin are the favorite novelists. In the non-fiction field Fieldmarshall Montgomery's Memoirs is the bestseller, followed by a book on Soviet People. The biography of Otto Habsburg, expected to do well after the recent debate over the return of the Pretender, was "a commercial fiasco," a fact not without political significance.

The Christmas festivities, here as in Germany, come on Christmas Eve, and the 25th itself is a day to sleep, if the children will only keep quiet. There will have been a tree to decorate, presents to open, a festive dinner, perhaps some champagne, and then midnight mass - a family occasion throughout, and most Austrians find the idea of going to a party on Christmas Eve a strange one.

The first problem in preparation is to keep the children out while father and a commandeered unmarried aunt get the tree up and the packages wrapped. If one is unlucky, the living room may have several doors, all of which must be kept locked against furious, if intermittent, poundings and demands for admission. Sometimes there will be a few seconds silence, followed by an organized chant from the children of "Christkind kommt, Christkind kommt, Christkind kommt" ("The Christchild comes" - but the thought is of presents and not of religion!)

On the tree go candles, the usual glass balls, tinsel, tinfoil icicles, a lot of candy in various shapes and wrapped in gay papers and tinfoils, and, for extra special effect, a few sparklers. Candy and homemade ornaments are more common than manufactured decorations, even at high income levels (and although Christmas decorations are in important export item). Somewhere else in the room there is sure to be a creche, not, perhaps, as ornate a one as in Italy, although handcarved shepherds and wise men are a traditional export from the Tyrol. In each window that can be seen from outside a larger candle will be burned, a symbol of remembrance for those who have fallen in the war and are no longer there to celebrate with the family.

At last all is ready. Grandmother will have arrived, and perhaps another aunt. The candles on the tree will be lit. Father may ring the little silver bell that announces Christmas, although tradition says that the oldest member of the family should have this honor. Then, and only then, can the family come in, with the older generation hurrying ahead so as to glimpse the eyes of the children as they see the tree and the presents for the first time. And no candle or sparkler on the tree will outshine those eyes.

The package opening will be furious, of course. Toys will have been made in Germany, England, Norway, America, Japan, and perhaps even one or two in Austria. Mechanical toys, dolls, and children's books - and clothing - are bought in largest quantities, and if the toys are educational, it is usually incidental.

After they have all been tried, and one or two broken, and the debris cleared away, the table is laid for Christmas dinner. This will be meatless, if the family is Catholic - as most in Austria are - but invariably elaborate, and the sadfaced carp facing

his doom is as common a figure in Austrian pre-Christmas cartoons as the turkey in American pre-Thanksgiving ones. (And carp it will be, unless the family is lucky enough to have cornered a large enough stream trout from the mountains; landlocked Austria has almost no other fish.)

For midnight mass St. Stephen's Cathedral used to be the place to go. One must have a ticket to get in, and another ticket - for the obtaining of which "connections" are needed - for a seat. Five years ago a Mozart mass was sung by a chorus from, as I recall, the Vienna Opera. This year music was by the Young Vienna Chorus, an outstanding secular group that was founded in 1945 and played a significant role in providing a large number of local young people with a healthy replacement for the social and cultural activities of the Hitler Youth. Unhappily, the group was not at its best for the Christmas mass, Vienna's new Cardinal did not put in an appearance (he had returned festively from Rome the preceding day), and the highest official of the Federal government identifiable in the reserved pews was the Minister of Education; St. Stephen's, too, had apparently come down in the social world since its repair was completed.

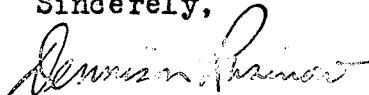
The partial destruction of this cathedral in 1945 aroused more enduring anti-German sentiment in the Viennese than any other single act done by the northern cousins here during the war. It came at the last moment, as the Germans were leaving, and the German guilt was a double one. First, the Wehrmacht took all the city's firefighting equipment with it as it withdrew (only to abandon it in the fields between here and Linz). The Cathedral had already caught fire from neighboring buildings after a minor bombing attack, but the Viennese, fighting the blaze by hand, had it almost under control. Then, for reasons that remain obscure, the Germans opened fire on the roof with artillery. There was no hope then. When the fire burned out, the roof was gone, the interior gutted, the glass destroyed, and the tower - said by many to be the most beautiful Gothic campanile in Europe - was collapsing. Vienna's symbol and historic and spiritual heart had been destroyed, as the Viennese still say, by the Germans. Within the last three years the new interior was completed, work is still being done on the campanile, and last month installation of the new organ, said to be the largest in Europe, was finished. Vienna's heart is nearly as perfect as before the battle, but, perhaps for this reason, the importance of the Christmas service there seems to have diminished.

At midnight on Christmas Eve all the churchbells of Austria announce the Christmas news. I remembered, from my first Austrian Christmas, the remarkable carrying power of these bells over snow-fields, from village to village the length of Austria's Rhine valley. This year the magic sound was muffled in Vienna by a torrential downpour, a most unlikely occurrence. ("First time I ever carried an umbrella on Christmas Eve," I heard one elderly Viennese mutter. "It should either snow or do nothing. It's those atomic bombs.") But nothing stifled the voice of the Pummerin, the great bell of St. Stephen's, that had crashed from the top of the tower to the ground in the fire of 1945. Recast at St. Florian as

a contribution to the reconstructed Cathedral from the people of Upper Austria in 1952, and rehung in a lower and stronger tower, the Pummerin thunders again, deep, firm and unmistakable, across the Danube Basin. Almost, one imagines, to the Czech and Hungarian borders.

A friend had traveled up from the United States Sixth Fleet to spend the holiday here, and had been invited for Christmas into a Viennese home, a rarer privilege than he knew. It was, he declared most firmly afterward, the best Christmas he had ever spent. Perhaps, all reservations considered, Austria is still the land where they know best how to celebrate Christendom's highest feast.

Sincerely,



Dennison Rusinow

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