

Christmas in Germany in the 1940s

Volker Haufler, Electronic message to Michael M. Miller from Preetz-Schellhorn, Germany

Dear Michael,

Although Christmas is now almost over, I would like to add some memories as well, as requested by you. My ancestors from my father's side emigrated from Schwaben to Southern Ukraine at the early 19th century. However, as my father died in 1945 as prisoner of war in Russia when I was just one year old, I did not inherit any German-Russian habits. I was brought up in a smaller German university town (Marburg in Hesse) by my mother (later I had a very nice step-father) and my grandparents. Marburg was of no strategic importance and only partially damaged by bombs during World War II. Unfortunately, the house of my family was completely destroyed in February 1945. First Christmas I remember must have been in 1948. The Christmas tree was decorated with "Lametta" (silvery shining alufoil bands). The gifts very poor after today's standards: some fruits, somewhat chocolate, something to dress, of course handmade and out of some fabric remnants. Toys, if at all, were also handmade by my grandfather, e.g. a little wooden cart. As usual in Germany, Christmas Eve was the most important day for us as children. My grandfather once was Father Christmas, usually we had the "Christkind" coming. The children were not allowed to see the living room after around 12 a.m. at Christmas Eve until a little bell was ringing somewhere in the apartment as sign that the Christkind just had brought some gifts. The "Bescherung" (presentation of gifts) was at around 6 p.m. after we had come from the "Christvesper" (Christmas matins). The meal at Christmas Eve was always very simple (as in most German households that evening), we had "Heringsalat" (salad of herring). Very common in Germany is also "Frankfurter" with potato salad. The main and much better meal always was on Christmas Day, usually a goose, when we could afford it later on. This was also the time to meet the grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins etc. Something special was a Care parcel from USA with many food products we normally did not get those days. It may have arrived some days before Christmas but was placed under the Christmas tree. When I was between 3 and 7 years old, "America" for me was synonymous with a kind of wonderland with everything being bigger, better and available in abundance, for reasons I did not know. This perception was even more nourished by my mother working in the private home of American officers where she was sewing clothing whilst I was playing with some American kids. She was not payed in money, but with precious products like (real) coffee, meat, fabric or cigarettes which she could exchange for basic food. Later, of course, the Christmas presents became bigger and more precious, but the basic tradition with the "Christkind" we, in our family today with our own 2 grown up daughters, are still keeping although my wife comes from Northern Germany where it is more common to have Father Christmas. As I am pretty sure that some of the Haufler family (brothers and sisters of my grandfather) emigrated from the Ukraine / Crimea to North America, I would be more than happy to get in contact with some of them. May be yours newsletter system can be of help.

Best wishes and a Happy New Year,

Volker Haufler