

# Christmas and christmas customs in Switzerland

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## CHRISTMAS AND CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS IN SWITZERLAND

Today, Christmas has become the most important church and family festival, never failing to excite the thoughts of children everywhere, not to mention the thousands of mothers and fathers during those last hectic days which lead up to Christmas. To the family, Christmas signifies a day of pleasure and of gifts and this meaning remains the same throughout Switzerland.

However, the celebrations that nearly all enjoy today were completely unheard of in the early days. Years ago the church festival had a far greater significance than any form of celebration held at home. The individual church customs of the particular region were adopted by members of the congregation and simply repeated at home.

The essential meaning of the Christmas message was embodied in the Christian Church as far back as 400 A.D. in conjunction with the decision that the birthday of Jesus Christ should be celebrated on 25th of December. Towards the end of the Middle Ages it was thought fit to transfer New Year's Day to a date somewhat nearer that of Christmas Day. In those days, Christmas festivities were made up of various ancient customs which had originated long before the time of Christ (including those of Roman and Germanic origin), together with the rites practised by people who worshipped the mysterious resources and strength of nature during wintertime when the sun entered the sign of Capricornus.

From ancient times, the period between 25th December and 6th January (Three Wise Men's day) has been regarded as a special occasion; people even spoke of the "Holy Days". On and after St. Nicholas Day, people tried to drive the evil demons out of the house by making as much noise as possible. At that time it was quite common practice to decorate the house with green branches from the fir tree.

The Christian Church certainly gave the Christmas season a far greater significance, not only by arranging various religious festivals but also by producing plays based on the birth of Christ. The most beloved figures of the Holy Family and of course the Three Wise Men were included in these plays. In certain areas the Holy Manger was a special feature in church festivities, and once again the beloved images were nearby. Through the medium of Christmas plays and Holy Mangers the church authorities hoped to give the people a closer conception of the birth of Jesus Christ. The practice in Switzerland of having a Manger scene in private houses has only become popular in recent decades, and then mostly in Catholic areas and families.

The Christmas custom whereby presents are given to each member of the family can be traced back many years, with the difference that in ancient times presents were not given with any particular reference to Christmas. Presents in those days were on a much larger and grander scale and the custom was practised in the Catholic districts on St. Nicholas Day and on New Year's Day in the French parts of Switzerland. This custom dates back to the Roman times when people were in the habit of distributing New Year gifts in the belief that this act of kindness would result in good luck throughout the coming year.

During the course of the last decades, one will find the custom of giving presents has become closely associated with the festive season. Purchasing presents for friends and relatives is today the main attraction of the family celebrations. A newcomer to appear on the Christmas

scene is the illuminated tree. The Christmas tree or "Christ" tree, as some of the people describe it in their own language, has won ultimate victory in practically all parts of Switzerland. The fir tree with its lighted candles has found a definite place in the living-rooms of both rich and poor alike. It shines in the darkness with serene beauty and this simple yet charming attraction has successfully appealed to the hearts of Swiss people the length and breadth of the land. When one realises that the first Christmas tree in Switzerland was erected in the house of a rich Zurich family in the year 1775, and that for a good hundred years afterwards it was only the better-class families who took to the habit of having a tree, it is quite remarkable how commonplace the custom has become in Switzerland. Use of the illuminated Christmas tree spread at first throughout the Protestant regions of Eastern and Northern Switzerland, but it was only in this century that the fir tree finally conquered the hearts of people living in the Grisons, North-Western Switzerland (i.e. the Bernese Jura, Neuchâtel) and the Lake of Geneva district. The tree has established itself as a Christmas favourite in Central Switzerland, but the custom still meets with less approval from the other Catholic localities. Only in the Canton of Ticino has this custom remained completely unacceptable. Should one happen to discover a Christmas tree in this area, it will most certainly belong to a family that has moved into the Canton from another district. The candle-lit tree has a definite connection with the practices of the ancient cults who worshipped light in any shape or form, but of course these days the tree is accepted as a vital part of the Christmas celebrations.

Today it is the family custom to lay all the Christmas presents underneath the Christmas tree. The children are kept in magical suspense until the very last moment, the parents leading them to believe that the tree and presents have just been delivered by the Christchild. As in early times, the tree continues to be decorated with apples, nuts and small pastries, but as a modern touch oranges and chocolate may be added. The various tree decorations available become more attractive as the years go by — especially in the big cities. Artificial decorations such as tinsel and other glittering attractions, coloured glass balls, snowballs and so on are regular favourites. A rather simpler custom in a few parts is for the parents to place the children's presents in a hanging stocking or stack the gifts outside the child's bedroom door. However, this latter custom is slowly dying out in favour of the Christmas tree.

Yes, Christmas is a time when families and relatives meet in a friendly and benevolent atmosphere, but one must not forget the joy experienced in hospitals, children's homes, homes for the aged, institutions, clubs and companies. In the cities and larger towns the custom of displaying tall illuminated trees in open places is steadily becoming popular.

Only a few places such as Higher Tösstal (Zurich Oberland), the Canton of Schwyz and other mountainous districts does the "holy tree" successfully resist the advance of the Christmas tree. In Eastern Switzerland, where in earlier times the Christmas tree was completely unknown, it was the custom on Christmas Eve to burn an immense log on the open cooking fireplace with the family gathered around in a semi-circle. Since the advent of the Christmas tree and the gradual disappearance of the open

fireplace and chimney the custom of burning "Noël's Log" has lost the importance it once held in the community.

The most important ingredient of Christmas fare in Switzerland could be those delicious Christmas pastries that are prepared and cooked days ahead. According to districts, there are many varieties to choose from such as fancy-shaped cake bread, bread made from dried pears and nuts, honey cake, various pastries made from white flour, eggs and yeast, honey biscuits, aniseed biscuits in relief, "Tirggel" made of sugar, honey and flour, and the "goodies", the many varieties of home-made, fancy-shaped biscuits, and all kinds of marzipan delicacies. One should also mention the "Christmas Roast" (meat or poultry) — a dish appreciated by town and country folk. Of course, in early times the fine food and drinks that were served at Christmas time was far more appreciated than today, due to the fact that the standard of living throughout the year in those days was extremely simple.

An old Christmas custom which is still practised in places such as Bremgarten, Rheinfelden and Celerina in

the Grisons, is the so-called "Star-singing". It was in Lucerne, in the year 1900, that the children first went singing through the streets dressed as the Three Wise Men and often accompanied by a musical instrument. As a banner they carried before them an illuminated star (the Star of Bethlehem) — hence the expression "Star-singing". Even today at Rheinfelden one can see the twelve Sebastiani singers making their way through the town singing the old Christmas songs and carols dating back to the year 1400 A.D. — Celerina is also acquainted with Noël's Watch Night. Yet another ancient custom that has been revived in a few places is for people to sing hymns and carols from the top of a tower, their voices carrying in all directions.

As we recall these customs, old and new, you will realise that Switzerland offers a great deal in the way of Christmas customs and folklore, and the people are determined to make Christmas the finest festival of the year.

*Eugen Schneider*  
(Swiss National Tourist Office.)

# CHRISTMAS 1968

## AMBASSADOR'S MESSAGE

Some readers of "The Swiss Observer" will remember me from the days when I was First Secretary of the Legation under Henri de Torrenté. That was fourteen years ago, and since I left London in 1954 my diplomatic roaming has taken me to Berne, Paris, West Africa, Turkey and Geneva. As you see, I have not been so very far away from this country physically, and I have remained very close to it in spirit. In a way, I feel as if I had never really left England at all, for I am now busy, not so much establishing new contacts as renewing old ones.

Something that did not exist when I was here last, however, is the Swiss Centre — a most gratifying innovation. I am hoping that during my term of office it will be further developed to include a Forum of Switzerland, which will cater for cultural activities and provide a "Foyer" for the Swiss community. But vigorous efforts are still required before this plan can be realized.

My wife and I are particularly glad to be with you again at this season of family reunions. We wish you all, old friends and new, a Merry Christmas and a very Happy New Year.

RENÉ J. KELLER.

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**A Happy Christmas and a Prosperous New Year**

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