

Week of 23 March 2008

All seasons play an important part in the lives of Germans. The awakening of nature, after the sterility of winter, the water released from the ice, the traditions of the Easter rabbit and Easter eggs, all bring a special joy of renewal and hope in the spring.

Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ on the third day after the crucifixion, is the oldest Christian feast introduced in the second century. Palm Sunday, Gründonnerstag or Green Thursday, and Karfreitag or Good Friday, are important and sacred holy days preceding Easter.

One of the most popular secular traditions during the week prior to Easter is the coloring and hand decorating of Easter Eggs. Children and adults enjoy creating original designs on hard-boiled eggs or on the more delicate shell of the blown-out egg. Some traditions passed down in families incorporate batik style or scratching designs. Some use a technique which scratches a pattern with acid or lemon juice, others use melted candle wax on the shell and dye the eggs in different colors. These eggs are often given as gifts to friends or used to decorate an Easter egg tree. Fresh green forsythia or pussy willow branches are cut and brought into the house as a symbol of spring and the renewal of life.

Parallel to the secular activities of holy week are the religious services. Various foods served on "Gründonnerstag" or Holy Thursday and Karfreitag reflect these somber days. A Speckkuchen or bacon cake and "Grüne Sosse" are served in some areas of Hesse as well as other states. Spinach and dumplings are other favorite dishes this time of year.

Easter Sunday brings the message of the risen Lord and with it a rebirth and renewal. For many the traditional "Osterspaziergang" is the highlight of the day and affords the first opportunity to spend time outdoors in nature.

According to an ancient superstition, all church bells fly to Rome on the day before Easter. In the place of bells, wooden clappers were used. Processions of boys with such clappers can still be seen in some villages in Baden. There are also other ancient traditions observed on Palm Sunday and during the Passion in Germany. One of these is the old dramatic representations of the Passion of Jesus, from which the internationally famous Oberammergau Passion play developed.

Special Easter foods are also made for the Easter dinner. Dinner is a very festive meal which in many homes consists of lamb, ham or young goat. Pretzels of all sorts are made in some areas. One type of pretzel is especially large and thick into which colored eggs in the shell are baked. Breads and braids of yeast dough with raisins and nuts are also baked. A specialty in some homes is the Osterlamm cake. It is baked in a lamb cake form and decorated with a fluffy white frosting and coconut simulating wool. Frequently the resurrection banner of a purple cross on a white background adorns the top of the cake.

The joyous message of Easter truly brings with it a reawakening in nature and a renewal in man.

Sources:

Gilgenast, Trudy. "The Flour is Different." 2003