

So who does bring the Christmas tree? (*December 2017*)

I must have been one of the very few children who never really liked Christmas. I had a very good excuse: Christmas, as far as I can remember it, always confused me. Until I was four, my world was simple and full of marvellous things. Every Advent meant the *Rorate* Masses: sung High Mass every day, early in the morning (around 6am), in a dark and normally cold church with only the candles giving some light. It is a still cherished tradition in the former Habsburg countries, going back to the 12th century.

On the eve of 6th December I had to clean a shoe or boot (yes, just one), put it out in the window, and by the morning S. Nicholas would fill it with chocolates and other sweet things if I was good enough that year. Which, needless to say, I always was!

And finally on the morning of 24th December there was the Christmas tree in the sitting room that stayed with us until 2nd February. I was told that the tree was brought to us by the Baby Jesus. It was shining with lights and decorated with baubles, stars, angels. And of course with *Salonzuckerl*, small sweets covered with chocolate and wrapped in shiny coloured foil, authentic reminders of the peaceful times of Austria-Hungary.

Under the tree there were the nicely decorated boxes, gifts to be opened after supper. The day passed slowly; though the tree and the gifts were within reach, they were strictly out of limit until supper. The supper was always some vegetable soup and fish since fasting was strictly observed on the Vigil. The fish was followed by big, round wafers with honey (reminding us of the sweet Saviour present in the Host) and the *bejgli*, a roll of sweet yeast bread with a dense, rich filling of poppy seed. Once the supper was over, we sang Christmas songs around the tree and opened the gifts. The both exciting and exhausting day finished with Midnight Mass.

In the December of 1983 my brother, while I was choosing a sufficiently capacious boot for S. Nicholas, revealed to me that it was our parents who put chocolates in the boot. And not only that: even the Christmas tree was bought and decorated by them. Since I did not believe him, he woke me up the night before Christmas and we sneaked into the sitting room, and indeed there were my parents standing around a simple tree, with decorations in their hands. I was disappointed and confused, while my parents were somewhat relieved: they did not have to decorate the Christmas tree in silence, during the night any more, and they could ask us to help them!

1985 was reserving another twist for my Christmases: I started school. The Communist regime did not allow anything religious in schools; and since they could not abolish Christmas, they tried to transform it. Instead of Christmas tree, we had “winter trees”; instead of Christmas, we had “celebration of the fir tree”. No mention of Jesus, of course, and S. Nicholas became the Soviet *Ded Moroz* (Old Man Frost) accompanied by a Snow Maiden who, in all honesty, was always rather underdressed, considering Russian winters. In 1989 the Soviet soldiers finally left, and *Ded Moroz* gave way to the American chubby Santa Claus, further increasing my confusion.

The long sequence of cultural shocks regarding Christmas did not finish with my childhood. After a peaceful period, I was again exposed to new traumas when in 2004 I moved to Italy. Whenever I talked to my Italian parishioners and friends about Hungarian Christmas traditions, it always aroused horror and amusement. They were shocked by the idea of giving gifts. They thought we were exotic barbarians because we put *Salonzuckerl* on the Christmas tree instead of “proper decorations” such as glass baubles from Murano or designed by Gucci. For them the tree should be decorated on 8th December instead of 24th so that there would be time enough to enjoy it. The most important meal is Christmas lunch on 25th with capon broth and tortellini, wild boar stew,

panettone and a loud family who refuse to leave the table before 5pm.

But most importantly, they were always keen to point out that Baby Jesus is too small to carry around Christmas trees. This really drove me crazy. As if in Hungary we did not know! Of course He is too small for that; that is why He is assisted by the Angels. In Italy the Christmas tree is brought by *Babbo Natale* – a certain “Father Christmas” who is a mixture of *Ded Moroz* and Santa Claus, but being Italian, he obviously dresses smarter than the former and is in better shape than the latter.

To cut a long story short, I gave up on having clear ideas about Christmas and I have been simply combining the best of both cultures: now we have a Christmas tree from early December until way after Epiphany, both Christmas dinner and lunch, *beigli* and panettone, and on our Christmas tree you will find *Salonzuckerl* next to Gucci baubles.

And just when I thought that was it, I find myself again in a new country with new Christmas traditions: decorations on in November, puddings prepared weeks before Christmas, paper crowns and crackers, carol services, meatless mince pies. And while I enjoy it all immensely, I must be honest with you. I still do not have the courage to ask the question: now, who do *you* think brings the Christmas tree?