

## **My Easter Holidays (in Styria)**

**Ulrike Wright**

Today is 'Karsamstag' (Holy Saturday)! My primary school closes at midday for the Easter holidays. That means: no school for a whole week and a little bit longer! By the way, the sun always shines during the holidays!

This evening, 'Osterfeuer' (Easter fires) will light up the hill tops all around, here in the countryside: Bonfires of dry twigs and bits of wood collected during the winter especially for this purpose. About midnight, the young men (and probably their fathers!) are going to create lots very 'unholy noise' setting off enormous firecrackers: a pagan tradition intended to finally get rid of Winter and evil spirits!

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday and I'll be standing on our balcony to watch the Palm Procession. This is a very solemn, festive event! The priest in the customary robes for Passion Time, i.e. white surplice over purple soutane, followed by 4 or 5 boys, also clad in white (probably the altar boys, who also sing Soprano in the church choir), will be carrying the monstrance along the street at a ceremonial pace. Here, at intervals, small altars will have appeared seemingly overnight. They are always beautifully bedecked with white altar cloths fringed with handmade lace and decorated with green twigs. The priest stops at each of these and says a short mass. In the wake of the church procession, usually come lots of people carrying green branches for the priest to bless in the hope that these will bring good luck at home during the year.

The coming week, Karwoche (Holy Week), is a busy one with preparations for Easter. Among other jobs, hard-boiled and 'blown' eggs must be dipped in special colourings and / or painted. There are Easter cards to be made, drawn, painted, addressed and sent off. The rabbit house and chicken coop, for obvious reasons, have to be cleaned extra carefully and thoroughly so that the inmates will be happy and reward children! It is probably on Wednesday that Mutti (our mother) is particularly busy in the kitchen. In a large bowl she prepares a fine yeast dough in which raisins and small pieces of candied orange peel will be hiding. Then she covers the bowl with a cloth and puts it in a warm place for the dough to prove. Disappointingly, I am not allowed to peep under the cloth to see if anything is happening! After it seems like an age, the risen dough comes out of the bowl and receives a severe hiding by Mother's fist: probably to punish it for taking so long to rise! Mutti divides the dough into three long sausages from which, sometimes with my help, she produces a beautiful plait. This lovely thing, sitting on a baking sheet, then has to prove again underneath the cloth until finally, brushed with milk and egg and possibly scattered with flaked almonds, it goes into the hot oven from which, after another age

(our oven doesn't have a glass front, so I can't see it happening), it emerges as a wonderfully aromatic, beautiful 'Osterzopf". It's all soo exciting!

The following day is 'Gründonnerstag' (Maundy Thursday). We get up early and go out into the bare ploughed fields, where the damp earth smells particularly nice in the sunshine. We're looking for fresh, young shoots of sorrel and ribwort plantain and the, as yet, still pale dandelion leaves, bleached like rhubarb, deep in the dark soil. These, together with spinach from the garden and topped with fried eggs and 'Nockerln' (gnocchi - in English) become a deliciously simple midday meal. We don't really miss meat because it is a rare treat anyway, usually reserved for weekends. At Easter, it is served on the Sunday.

I must confess that, as a child, the tragedy of the Christian tradition was too far removed to touch me a great deal. The resurrection was much easier to accept. So my brother and I always looked forward to the 'Osterhase' (Easter rabbit), who had invariably (that is before WWII) secretly hidden colourful, foil-wrapped chocolate eggs and tiny eggs made of sugar with delicious liquid fillings, in our orchard. That meant (always in sunshine, remember!) egg searches with my little brother. Of course, Mutti and Vati saw to it that the booty was then divided equally. The Easter Breakfast table was always beautiful to behold: the special tablecloth, a vase of Primroses and scented Violets and Forsythia blossom from the garden; also a jug with dry twigs from which Mutti had prettily suspended the painted blown eggs on sewing thread. There were slices of 'Schwarzbrot' (dark rye sourdough bread - our everyday bread) and butter, as well as a slice of the Easter ham Mutti had cooked, and some freshly grated horseradish. The latter to be eaten with care!

The lovely coloured, hard-boiled eggs then, traditionally and very briefly, became the focus of a fierce contest: the so-called 'Eierpecken' where the winner ends up with his/her (to be politically correct!) egg intact, whereas the loser is left holding his, or her, bald egg and a handful of shells.

The 'Osterzopf' was mainly eaten 'zur Jause' (in the afternoon - akin to teatime).

After breakfast, we usually went for a nice walk 'somewhere green', e.g. into the small woods in the floodplain along the river. It was lovely there at Easter! We did not usually go into the small town in which we lived. We were such pagans! Many years later, at a different place, I remember attending the festive, joyous Easter high mass in the big old pilgrimage church on the hill.

I found a wealth of interesting historical facts and traditions relating to Easter while researching for this article. I can recommend this. It was far more difficult to gather my

childhood memories about our Easter time, and the result is most certainly incomplete. -  
But then, my childhood was a very, very long time ago .....