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Words

Lights and Cheer:

Dancing through the air like a ballerina, the scent of baking belgian waffles reached my nose.. Excitement swelled through me and stomach growled in anticipation. Though the world is just as sweet-smelling during the day, the most beautiful time to be at a German Christmas market was when the sun went down, and the Christmas lights illuminated everything and stars glinted like winking eyes. I was only able to spend a few Christmases in Germany but they were more wonderful than you could ever imagine. The air turned frigid, and, while the world shrivelled and became stark white and sparkling with snow, a warmth filled the air, so cheerful and kind. The U.S. spends so much time focused on the hustle and bustle of Christmas that the only filling the air is the hustle and bustle, just Germans...Germans know how to enjoy the season like no one else. I've always loved the cold, so during Christmas, I would go out and have snowball fights with the neighbors and build snow forts. The neighbors would bring each other gifts and Christmas cookies, especially for the *kinder*. But, the best thing about Christmas was the Christmas markets. Three stand out in my mind as exceptionally perfect: the cities of Cologne, Rodenburg, and Linden.

Cologne:

"Come on, kids!", my Mom pushed my brother and I towards the door, already wrapped in her heavy winter coat. My Dad lumbered towards the car behind us. We were invited by a friend of mine, Jesse Cooley, and his family to a Christmas market in Cologne, a huge German city famous for its cathedral. We were meeting them in the parking lot of the gas station on Vogelweh Military Base. They were already waiting when my family pulled into the lot. Jesse had black hair that covered his eyes and could move his ears without moving anything else; I thought that was so cool, especially since I had a small crush on him. And I suspected that he had a small crush on me, too. In a sweet gesture, Jesse had gotten me a Christmas present, a stuffed dog and a bracelet with my initial on it. I had also gotten him something, a lego set that I knew he liked. In his family's van waited his brother, mother, and father. While the ride up to Cologne was less than pleasant, with my getting carsick halfway up and having to move from the middle seat, when we reached the market itself, all I could feel was euphoria (and it wasn't because of the nausea).

If you can imagine the feeling of overwhelming excitement, the kind that makes you bounce up and down and count the seconds until whatever you're excited for happens, that's what I felt the moment I saw the Christmas market in Cologne. I could hardly believe that we were really going to spend the day in such a fairy-tale setting. The snow fell softly down on the rows of winding paths formed by the vendors' stands. They were beautiful and lopsided and perfect. And I love it all on sight. Jesse and his family led us through the market, pointing out the lights adorning the tops and sides of the stands. Trinkets glinted with the sparkle of the snowflakes when what little sun found its way through the clouds hit them. Puppets and stuffed

animals were displayed proudly by the artisans who had crafted them; baked gingerbread hearts hung from a ribbon, wrapped in protective plastic and adorned with calligraphy and designs that said things like “I love you,” or “Father” in German.

“Do you all want to try some?” Mrs. Cooley, Jesse’s mother, caught my attention, stealing it away from a nearby fairy ornament intricately created with details that made it come alive. She was referring to the Gluhwein, an alcoholic Christmas drink served in Germany. The parents bought Gluhwein, while the children were presented with Kinderwein, Gluhwein’s non-alcoholic alternative. Each drink is served steaming hot, with a tart taste that warms you to the core. Kinderwein is technically a form of red grape juice, but the thing that makes it special is the mix of sweet spices that gives it a kick; it tastes like hot wine would without the alcohol, and it’s wonderful. Vendors all throughout the market sold both Gluhwein and Kinderwein, along with so many other foods, such as Belgian waffles, popcorn, and a variety of baked goods.

We wandered the market with mugs in hand and bought Christmas trinkets galore. From tiny snow globes to beautiful ornaments painted with such extreme caution, no want was left unsated. Near the back of the market, as our adventure continued, we saw the Cologne Cathedral; based on the Gothic architecture popularized during the Middle Ages, it was a towering cathedral with two or three large spires. It was all black, with intricate patterns carved into it, depicting biblical scenes. The inside was even more impressive. Large stained glass windows let what little light was available that day in, but what really lit up one corner of the cathedral was the candles.

When you light a candle in that cathedral and say a prayer, they say that your loved ones can hear you in heaven; at least, this was what I was told by my parents. So, I lit two: one for each of my beloved dogs who had passed away a couple of years before and whispered “I love you” for each. My father, despite his anti-religious leanings, was impressed by the cathedral; it was a breath-taking sight. I’ve never seen a ceiling so high with such details on it. We didn’t stay in the cathedral long, though it was possibly the most memorable part of the entire trip, as it was very crowded.

We stayed in Cologne for several hours--and I loved every moment. As the sky darkened and cleared, the stars appeared. Snow gently fell from the few clouds still littering the moon-lit sky, settling on everything in sight. People began to clear out of the market and I got my chance to go on the carousel. Round and round the lovely horses ran, lights chasing them, and the sweet taste of belgian waffles and powdered sugar danced on my lips.

I fell asleep on the way home, the wonderful atmosphere of the market still filling my lungs with cheer like air--essential for survival.

Rodenburg:

Rodenburg was a city in the Middle Ages, known for its museum of Medieval torture devices. But when you go to a Christmas market in Rodenburg, that is not what you go to see. Usually, the town is somewhat sleepy. My family and I went once before, in the summer, and while it had tourists, it was generally a quiet town. But in Christmas, the lights turn on and the town’s life has returned. Just a couple of weeks after Cologne, here I was, walking along the sidewalk, which sparkled with the snow lining it.

As a little girl, sugar is the in the top ten things you love most; and snowballs easily satisfy that need for sugar. I'm not talking about frozen water that rains from the sky--I'm talking about Rodenburg Snowballs. Snowballs are heaven in your hands: fried dough, but not doughnuts, covered in a thick layer of icing and chocolate and comes in many different flavors. They really are formed like little snowballs. My family, when we first had this holiday treat, brought home several tins of them and ate them later.

"Come on, now. We have to get home soon," my Mom, once again pushing us towards the car, but this time to leave the Christmas market. I didn't want to go. This time, not a clear night, but a cloudy one, but filled with as much, if not more, cheer than in Cologne. German Christmas Music with German lyrics poured through the speakers, throughout the market, which wound through the entire town, through its narrow streets, playing every Christmas song imaginable, and recognizable whether you knew what the lyrics were or not. Shops were aglow with the business that the market brought them. And I didn't want to leave this beautiful and foreign world.

But I did leave. And I miss going to such wonderful places as these. But there is still one more.

Linden:

This Christmas market was not as large and bustling, not as bright, but far closer to my heart: my own town's Christmas Market.

Linden was a crowded and tiny town, but still exquisite, with a small town square near the cathedral in the center of everything. And, in the Christmas season, you could hear the church bells and see St. Nicholas coming to visit the children and have them tell him what they want for Christmas and St. Nicholas night, a holiday on December 6th in which good children leave out a shoe or boot, and St. Nicholas will fill their boot with goodies, mainly candy, almost as a Christmas warm-up. There was so much to love about Christmas in Linden from the lights on the trees that covered the town, to the small parade that marched its way through the town a few nights before Christmas. A small travelling carousel would park itself in the town square during our Christmas market time and vendors would set up around it. They would fill the town with the scent of baked goods, and I would always win a small stuffed animals from the games set up in the town square. One of the last years, I won a black dog stuffed animal; I regret getting rid of it now.

Christmas was one of the greatest seasons for me, especially in Germany. And the Christmas markets were the best part. But the hustle of the American Christmas has a way of ruining the season, causing unnecessary stress, and just making a cheerful time into a chore. I hope one day to once again experience a German Christmas, a time which creates a sense of family within a community instead of creating Black Friday, where people practically kill each other over gifts that may or may not be truly appreciated. But, until then, I guess I will have to settle for the American way: all stress, all the time.