

## News from Nan

### ANNA'S FAMILY HISTORY

# ISOLDE KNESCHKE SCHENK REMEMBERS CHRISTMAS IN GERMANY

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*This reminiscence was written by Isolde Kneschke Schenk in January 1997. It was translated by Diane Stutsman Shuey.*



*Isolde and Gisela Kneschke in about 1935*

*The Kneschke family home was in the village of Tannenberg, Saxony, Germany (northwest of Annaberg on the map below in what is known as the Erzgebirge).*



Isolde is the daughter of Betty Schreiter Kneschke, who discovered the “letters home” written in Forestville, Michigan, by Alvin Schreiter and sent to her grandfather, Friedrich Wilhelm Schreiter. Isolde and her husband, Helmut, left Saxony during or shortly after World War II and resettled in Hamburg, Germany. Her mother and sister Gisela remained in in the Erzgebirge (a part of Saxony near the border of what is now the Czech Republic).



Sisters Gisela and Isolde with their mother, Betty

Although I haven't lived in Erzgebirge for 50 years, I always have genuine homesickness for the Christmasland of Erzgebirge around the time of Advent and Christmas. It was a time of secrecy and expectation.

In the homes, Christmas mountains were erected, which had been in each family's possession for generations. The lights, so-called "spinners," were made from wood or brass and were hung up. The pyramids were erected. The mountain men and angel lights were decorated with candles and placed on the window sills. Whoever passed through the village could see exactly how many children lived in each house: for every girl there was an angel and for every boy a mountain man.

At the beginning of December the stollen was baked. One told the baker how many pounds of flour he wanted and the completion date was agreed upon. The baker set aside a piece of yeast and on the agreed-upon date one brought the ingredients such as raisins, butter or lard, sweet and bitter almonds, candied fruit rinds, sugar, cardamon, and mace. The baker mixed these into the yeast dough in our presence. Then the stollen was shaped and marked with initials. The stollen was left to rise and was later baked. When it had cooled sufficiently, one could take it by sled or hand-carry it home. There it would be spread with butter and dusted first with sugar and then with powdered sugar.

The stollen was wrapped in parchment paper and packed in a large wooden tub in the cellar and covered with a wooden lid. There it would rest until Christmas. The last stollen would usually be saved until Easter. Many families (up to 12) baked 3 or 4 pounds of stollen. We usually did 6-8 loaves.

At the appropriate time one had the baker mix a portion of mature, cooked, mashed potatoes. One spread the mash on a baking sheet. On that came dots of butter and sugar mixed with cinnamon. After baking, the potato cake was eaten fresh from the oven. It was scrumptious.

On Sundays during Advent there were always fanfares from the church steeples. Inside one could always hear the old Christmas traditions [traditional music]. Many villagers gathered near the churches in the streets and listened to these melodies.

On Holy Evening [Christmas Eve] there was Christmas dinner. In the afternoon there were lentils and bratwurst. Lentils in order that the money would never run out. In the evening nine different dishes were served. Among these were roast goose with potato dumplings and red cabbage, fruit preserves, bread, salt, and one candle – the life light – celeriac salad, and something to drink. After the meal the bread, salt, and candle were left in the middle of the table wrapped in a napkin. That meant that one would always have bread and light. Afterwards came the long-awaited distribution of Christmas presents. We children always waited, full of impatience, for the meal to be over and the dishes washed.

On December 25 everyone got up early and went out, often in deep snow, to Christmas services in the church, which began at 6 a.m. There Christ's birth was reenacted, the stories of Christ's birth were told,

and Christmas songs were sung. Father remained at home to make coffee and put the stollen, which would be cut for the first time, out on the table. He lit the candles on the Christmas tree. It was incredibly beautiful and festive when we all came expectantly from church and went home through the festively lit village. There the warm, candlelit room awaited us with its heavenly aroma of coffee, stollen, and candles.

Sylvester occurred at midnight with a blast from the church steeple. In the afternoon we again had lentils with bratwurst. The Old Year's Eve (Sylvester) was observed as the Second Holy Evening, and the 5th of January was the Third Holy Evening. The 6th of January was called High New Year. The nights between the 24th of December and the 6th of January were called the Inner Nights. Each night stood for a month. It was said that everything that one dreamed in the night would be fulfilled in the upcoming, corresponding month.

Besides this, one could not do any laundry between December 24 and January 6. It was customarily believed that to do so meant the family would become ill.

◀ 2018   ◀ CHRISTMAS   ◀ ERZGEBIRGE   ◀ GERMANY   ◀ HOLIDAYS   ◀ KNESCHKE   ◀ SAXONY   ◀ SCHENK   ◀ SCHREITER  
◀ TANNENBERG