Words and Traditions

Cultural exchange through words and traditions brings richness to our vocabulary and our lives.

German words
used in English

Angst
Dachshund
Doppelgänger
Ersatz
Gesundheit
Iceberg (Eisberg)
Kaput
Kindergarten
Leitmotif
Poltargeist
Sauerkraut
Schadenfreude
über (übbar)
Wanderlust
Weltschmerz
Wunderkind
Zeitgeist

English words that have been Germanized (eingedeutscht)

Handy
Shooting
Oldtimer
Bamer
Beamer
Mobbing
Beamer

While Christmas did not originate in Germany, many of the traditions surrounding the holiday did and have forever changed how Americans celebrate.

Legend has it that candy canes originated in Germany in 1670 and were brought to the U.S. in 1847 by a German-Swedish immigrant. By 1950, they were being mass produced and can still be found on Christmas trees and in the hands of children to this day.

Early versions of Advent calendars started in Germany in 1852 by publisher Gerhard Land. These calendars offered children a way to count down to Christmas by opening one “door” or “window” a day to reveal a Bible passage, poem, or small gift. Today they are sold all around the U.S. with varying gifts inside.

Decorating Christmas trees is a German tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages. It was popularized in the U.S. in the early 19th century by German immigrants. The love for the Christmas tree is even seen in the classic German Christmas carol, “O Tannenbaum” (“Oh, Christmas Tree”), which was written in 1824 by a Leipzig organist named Ernst Anschütz.

“Silent Night” (“Stille Nacht”) was penned by an Austrian pastor Joseph Franz Mohr on Christmas Eve in 1818. His friend, the choir master and organist for Mohr’s church, Franz Xaver Gruber, put a melody to the poem with his guitar. To this day, “Silent Night” is considered a national treasure. While you may hear it often in grocery stores, malls and in commercials in the U.S., in Austria, the song is traditionally not allowed to be publicly played before Christmas Eve.

The Weihnachtsmarkt is one of the many German Christmas traditions that has been adopted by Americans.