

Customs and traditions at Christmas time in Nyíregyháza

“Christmas is here, the Saviour was born”

Out of the series of winter feasts, a well-known Christmas carol begins with this statement, conveying the answer to the expectations of the Advent period: Jesus Christ has become a human for us, the promise of salvation has turned into flesh. Today, in the weeks leading up to one of the greatest feasts of Christianity, we can see a spree of gift shopping unfolding, with Christmas-themed decorations in homes, one more creative than the other. While arranging the menu for Christmas Eve a feast begins to take shape, and shopping for ingredients calls for a thorough itinerary. In this festive hustle and bustle, let's pause for a moment and look into how the Christmas period was celebrated 80-100 years ago in the eastern part of Hungary, in Szabolcs County. Let me invite you to an imaginary journey into the past, where, however, the location is a real one. Let us take a festive walk in the Sóstó Open Air Museum Village in Nyíregyháza, where Christmas stories and customs of the former residents of houses, relocated from regions of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County to the present museum, come to life in our imagination. We will look at the silent devotion for ceremonial preparation, interwoven with liturgical customs to ensure prophecy and future success.

After St. Andrew's Day, the “pig-slaughterer's” day (30 November), dance and music events were omitted and replaced by quiet days of fasting and abstinence, accompanied by a series of beliefs and customs. In Advent on Luca's Day, on 13 December, the focus was placed on prophesying and wizarding practices. On this day, the lads started to assemble the so called Luca chair, in our region by using seven kinds of wood and no nails. The works ended on Christmas Day, then the chair was exhibited at the midnight mass and whoever stood up on it could see who the witches were in the church. Today, grandmothers tell with a smile on their faces, that no Luca's day passed without marriage prophesying. Boys' names were put into dumpling dough, and it was believed that whichever dumpling came up on top of the water first, that one would tell them the name of their husband. Among the weather forecasting practices, the so called “luca calendar” was a well-known one. This predicted the weather for the 12 months ahead based on the weather of 12 days prior to Christmas.

The days before Christmas provided an opportunity for physical and mental renewal, thus, women tidied up the house, cooked, and men cleaned the yard and barn. While decorating the house, tools and ornaments with symbolic meanings appeared. Today, we could not imagine the holidays at year's end without a Christmas tree, however, erecting a Christmas tree really did not spread in Szabolcs County until after World War I. Based on the sources, this Protestant custom of German origin came into usage through the Viennese court, first among the aristocracy, then among the urban middle class, the village intelligentsia, and finally among the peasantry.¹ In Hungary, however, until the 1960s, poorer families used to put up a so called Christmas tree of life or an evergreen branch. This evergreen bough could be pine, juniper or poplar, which was tied to the main girder beam next to the lamp. The decoration of the evergreen bough and the Christmas tree was a secret, as this was the Christmas present itself, the so called angel's son. Sparkling-eyed children were smiled at by an angel from the top of the tree adorned with a star, candles, holy images, nuts, a red apple symbolizing fertility and a popcorn chain.

As the evening of 24 December arrived, the family was presented with a well-laid table in the ornate clean room. But the course of the evening varied by religion. Catholic families were fasting all day on 24 December, after the evening psalm, they ate beans and poppy seed bread

¹ Tátrai Zsuzsanna – Krácsony-Molnár Erika: Jeles napok, ünnepi szokások (Pécs, 1997.) 229.p. [Famous days, festive customs]

pudding with sugar as a traditional dish to have a lot of money. After the midnight mass, they consumed pork, sausage, fried sausage and spare ribs. When Szatmár Reformed people returned home from the church, they placed apples, nuts and pumpkins on the festive table, that were supposed to bring money and fertility. In addition, sausage specialities, stuffed cabbage and noodles with poppy seeds, walnuts and cabbage were served.

Inhabitants of the bush farms in and around Nyíregyháza, the Lutheran tirpaks, placed a spade, a ploughshare and a hoe under the table for the time of dinner on Christmas Eve to ensure good luck and an abundant harvest in the upcoming year. The Christmas table was adorned with a hearty dinner: whole bread, poppy seed bread pudding, freshly fried sausage, pork broth with shell-shaped noodles, boiled meat with sour cream horseradish, stuffed cabbage, turkey, milk-loaf and strudel. This evening, families also commemorated their deceased loved ones by making an extra plate of food to pay their respects to them. At the bush farms, the last event of the evening was the nutcracking. Everyone took a nut of their choice and broke it open. Anyone who had a perished nut had to prepare for everything bad the following year. Wait, something is rustling under the window... the carol singers have arrived. "Can the Lord be praised?" they ask, but without waiting for a response, the young people start chanting the carol "Angel from Heaven". This angelic choir received apples, nuts, and milk-loafs as a gift, which they collected with great joy as they were walking from house to house.

A charitable group consisting of three young chanters set out for a star tour on the other days of Christmas as well, who also greeted the residents of the houses. They wore long white shirts, white loose trousers and caps, holding stars and rattling sticks in their hands, and were certainly welcomed not only by Catholic but also by Protestant families.

Out of all Christmas folk customs, carol singers were perhaps the most expected ones. The story of the birth of Jesus was narrated in a well-choreographed conversational performance with singing and dancing, acted out by 5 to 6 characters of the Nativity play. The two shepherds and the two angels wore white shirts and loose trousers and put cardboard caps with coloured bands on their heads. The old man wore a long fur coat or a long sleeveless frieze cape, with a fur-cap on his head, and carried a chain stick with him to lean on. The two shepherds beat the rhythm of the carol song with rattling sticks. In the Szatmár region, beside the shepherd, the angel and the old man, the characters of the cavalryman /called hussar/ and the outlaw /called betyár/ also emerged. Their main prop was the church-shaped nativity scene, in which the Holy Family was seen, with Jesus in the manger, next to Mary and Joseph. Subsequent to the Nativity play, the actors were given gifts and treated. They kept carrying around the joyful message from one house to another until New Year's Day: "Christmas is here, the Saviour was born".



The first Christmas trees were decorated with apples, communion bread, gilded paper and sweets



Nativity play



Nativity crib and above an evergreen bough, Sóstó Open Air Museum 2014 (Sóstó-Nyíregyháza)



Sóstó Open Air Museum in the winter (Sóstó-Nyíregyháza)



Set table with traditional Christmas dishes, 1997 (Sóstó Open Air Museum, Sóstó- Nyíregyháza)

Festive Christmas dishes:



Poppy seed roll and walnut roll



Poppy seed bread pudding



Jam-filled shortbread cookies



Gingerbread



Stuffed cabbage



Freshly baked sausages, blood sausages and liver sausages



Turkey breast with chestnut filling

Advent Fair, Christmas and Year's End Celebration in Nyíregyháza

In the run up to Christmas, locals and those visiting the county seat are awaited by the traditional Advent Fair in the centre of Nyíregyháza. The main square of the city is dedicated to this special time both in its festive decorations and activities. The pre-Christmas series of events offer a ceremonial lighting of candles and other illuminations, a craft fair, children's activities, a traditional Christmas exhibition in the ceremonial hall of the City Hall, an Advent programme series at the fair as well as New Year's Eve celebrations. On the stage set up on the square, colourful programmes create a real festive atmosphere. On weekdays, local groups, ensembles and schoolchildren indulge the fair-goers with their Advent shows, and on Sundays, celebrity guests entertain the audience.

Traditionally, the Kossuth Square is adorned by the pine tree of the city in front of the Savings Bank Palace, donated to the city by its inhabitants. The pine tree is decorated with great care, with light garlands, glowing stars and golden spheres. In addition, the city's kindergarteners and small schoolchildren also place their own drawings and messages on the tree. Besides the pine tree, the Santa Claus House and the manger of Bethlehem, will also be erected. Every year, a stage is set up for musical and vocal performances, and in line with the traditions, the Advent wreath is placed opposite the City Hall, next to the Kossuth statue.

The venue of the Christmas market is made up of wooden houses decorated with a uniform icicle motif and light mesh. There are several catering and gift shops on Kossuth Square, and the cafés of the square will also be part of the bustle with their heated terraces. Stands of historic churches and charitable actions of non-governmental organizations will be found too, and local folk craftsmen offer their unique handicrafts.

At the Advent Fair of Nyíregyháza, young and old can try different playful activities in the vicinity, such as: Star Flyer carousel, dodgem, children's carousel, a scaled-down copy of the Nyíregyháza narrow-gauge railway. Santa Claus is awaiting the children in the Santa Claus House, who will also move to the City Hall for a few days.

Keeping the traditions of previous years, the Municipality of Nyíregyháza awaits Advent fair-goers with freshly made hash browns called lapcsánka /grated potatoes fried in oil/, and Christmas craft classes also expect all those interested, where every family member can fabricate Christmas tree decorations and small gifts in Christmas atmosphere.

The City Christmas Concert held in the Roman Catholic Joint-Cathedral, has a long tradition, including the Szabolcs Symphony Orchestra and the Nyíregyháza Cantemus Choirs.

Advent in 2020

The pandemic has overridden many things. In early autumn, we were still hoping to celebrate the Advent period in the usual way, however, the pandemic regulations do not allow us to do so now.

This year's Christmas market is cancelled in Nyíregyháza too, and no cultural programmes will be held either. Nevertheless, the city administration has decided that the lights will remain, and the city centre, just like in previous years, will be dressed up in an ornamentation that evokes an uplifting Christmas atmosphere during the Advent period. Kossuth Square and the surrounding streets will be decorated with approximately ten kilometres of light chain, and to the delight of everyone, the city's Christmas tree has been erected, which is a 17-meter-high black pine tree this year.

As for the programmes: this year's Advent Fair will be quiet. On Advent Sundays (first on 29 November), with strict adherence to the epidemiological measures and rules, Advent candles will be lit.

The houses of the Advent Fair, once spreading the fragrance of mulled wine, tea, baked and roasted delicacies, will only be given a decorative function and remain empty, just like Santa's. However, the municipality does not forget about kindergarteners. In addition to the Magical Christmas exhibitions, the little ones were treated to Christmas candy every year in the Krúdy Hall of the City Hall. Since this special exhibition cannot be held now either, the city administration will deliver this delicacy to the educational institutions. Retirees will also receive a gift package from the municipality by post. This little gesture is a token of appreciation – it is important to pay attention to each other and bring joy to each other's lives, even in the present extraordinary situation.

Every Sunday, at the Advent candle lighting, members of the city administration light a candle on the city wreath with a representative of the church, for the first time with the Lutheran dean, who said:

"We are facing a staggering Christmas, but we pray to our Lord, in this situation too, to give us a wise heart. Grant us, our Lord, to dress our whole heart and soul in celebration nonetheless."

What we can do now in the pre-Christmas time is to calm down and ignite the light of faith, hope, joy, and love in ourselves.



Advent wreath on the background of the City Hall- 2020 (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Advent wreath 2020 (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Advent candle lighting on 29 November 2020 (Dr. Ferenc Kovács, Mayor and Dr. Attila Ulrich, Vice-Mayor)



Christmas illumination, City Hall, 2020 (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Christmas tree of the City (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Christmas tree of the City – decorated with children's drawings



Advent Fair (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Christmas craft class – Advent Fair (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Festive lights (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Kossuth Square, 2019 - drone photography: Árpád Kohut



City center - drone photography: Árpád Kohut



Santa Claus House (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



 NYÍREGYHÁZA

Santa Claus House (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



Advent Fair (Kossuth Square, Nyíregyháza)



The children meet Santa Claus at the City Hall



Christmas exhibition in the ceremonial hall of the City Hall



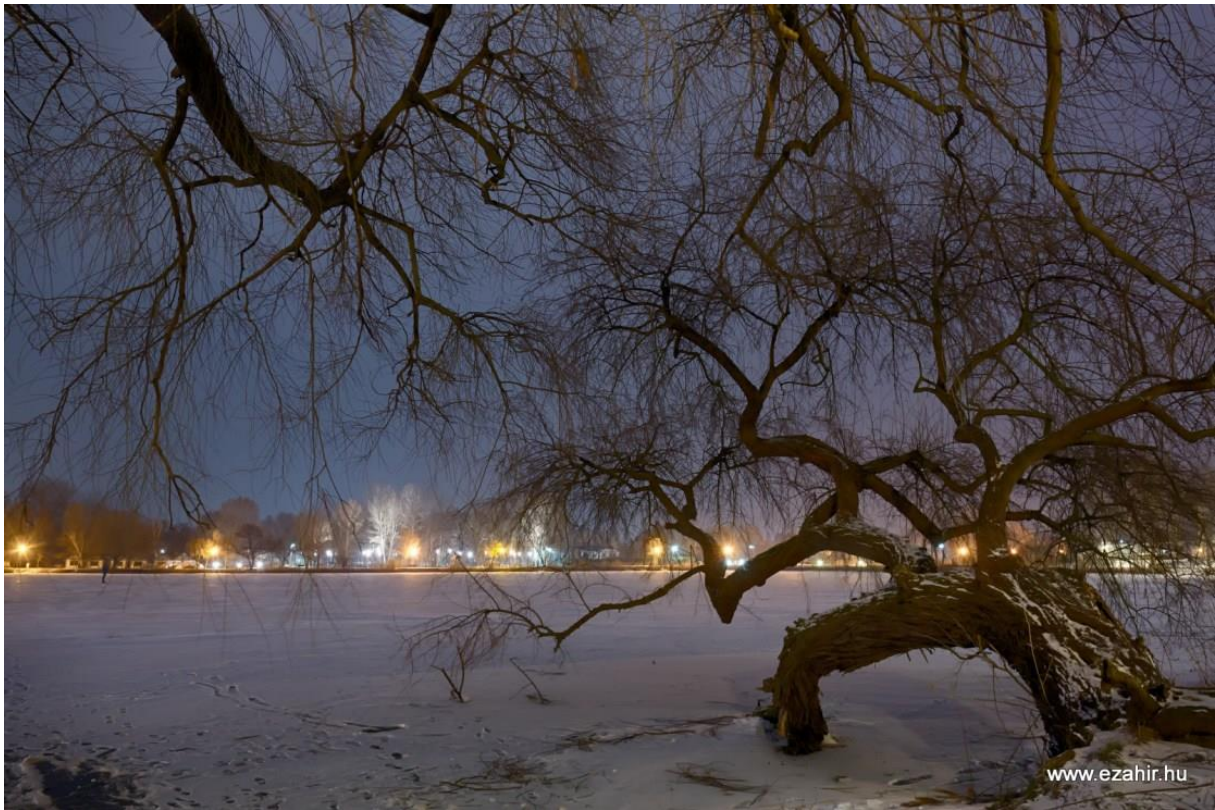
Christmas concert of the City in the Roman Catholic Joint-Cathedral



Sóstó in the winter, 2020



Sóstó in the winter, 2020



Sóstó in December 2019



Sóstó in the winter - photography: Nyírdrón



Zoo - Sóstó



Zoo - Sóstó



Sóstó in the winter - photography: Nyídrón

VIDEO : Winter-clad Sóstó:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XhXGgKuJ9ts&feature=emb_title

VIDEO: The wonderful world of Sóstó

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x44fodlZRdw&feature=emb_title