

Christmas in Veneto, a region situated in the north-east of Italy.

Since past times Christmas reminds to the Nativity of Jesus and covers a period of 14 days that go from Christmas eve on December the 24th to January the 6th, day of the Epiphany.

In Italy the subject of Nativity has inspired through the centuries many painters, sculptors, writers and music composers with hymns of praise.

My memories about it, in the second part of last century.

After the dark period of the second world war people somehow began to celebrate it with the few things they had. It was yet a very special day in which they managed to see each other and to spend maybe the day together.

The week before Christmas was dedicated to the “*novena*”, a special prayer-meeting held either at home or at the catholic church.. Churches were full of people of all socials classes and many of them were happy to attend a celebration, to cherish and remember the happy times of their childhood and their attachment to the rural costumes.

In those days also the “*presepe*”, an ancient custom widely known in the whole peninsula, was made for the town or for the main church. It was a real competition within the local community to invent new solutions by creating special scenes to effect people’s fantasy, making it charming year after year.

Christmas was a time of great happiness for children in front of the “*presepe*”. In a chapel they could have the event of the Nativity in front of their eyes. It was set also at kindergarten, at school in every classroom, by students and teachers with great joy of everyone. It was common use to visit, in the period from Christmas to Epiphany, the “*presepe*” of other churches or those around the city.

In the evenings before Christmas the young guys of the community used to visit every family in the town and even every house, also the farthest ones in the country was reached, with the “*stella*”, a special lit up star, singing Christmas songs and making best wishes to everyone. The head of the family generally gave them a good tip and something hot to drink, often a good glass of burnt wine with spices and cakes to take home.

People were used to visit each other to exchange Christmas wishes.

The High Mass of midnight was held in the main churches. The service was attended especially by young people dressed with their Sunday best suits to underline the solemnity of the meeting and also to catch the eye of the fair sex and maybe to begin a flirt that could last till carnival, springtime or even for life with a marriage.

At home mothers had a hard time keeping children quiet until they gave them their permission to start building their own “*presepe*” near the fireplace or in the best corner of the house.

They had to look for fresh moss, bark and twigs outside in the country and than to prepare it with old and new statuettes, maybe helped by their best friends.

On the Christmas eve the heads of the families gathered their children around the fireplace (families were larger than nowadays) to burn the Christmas log with juniper and to sing Christmas carols all together.

During the Christmas holiday it was common use to give each other presents. Once people used to make presents to the people they depended on, and by whom they expected to receive a certain favour. A pair of fat capons or a turkey, a flash of selected wine, sweets or other things were given to the doctor, the midwife, the schoolteacher, from the tenant farmer to the landlord.

In the villages the employees paid visits to the local authorities. For the occasion men used to wear dark worsted suits and women their Sunday dresses, a laced shirt, satin vest and leather gloves.

For children the main worry was the recitation of the Christmas poem prepared at school with the letter for their father. It was written in a beautiful handwriting, supervised by the teacher or by the eldest sister, written on a special laced paper with vignettes fitted for the occasion.

While setting the table for lunch, the letter was hidden inside father's napkin or under his plate. In finding it, he would show great surprise and pleasure hearing the promises made by his kids.

But it was also a special tip day for children. They received tips from their fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles and so on.

The supper on Christmas eve, after a fasting day, was made of a traditional dish: noodle soup (noodles were the symbol of the clothes Jesus was wrapped in, according to a popular saying).

The second course consisted in snails, marinated eel, cod, and spinach. (snail's horns were symbol of the conflicts that had to be buried inside the stomach that had to be well prepared for Christmas).

A piece of bread was often kept aside to cure future belly aches: the saying was that this bread never decayed or became mildewed.

Poor people on Christmas eve would enter the homes of the rich with a hamper to be filled with food. In gentlemen' homes, staff ate together with the family as a sign of equality, in order to respect Jesus preaches.

The use for Christmas day's dinner, for rich people, was to prepare "*Tortellini*" or "*Ravioli*" in capon broth, "*Risotto con fegatini*", a dish made of rice with chicken's livers in sage sauce, and as second course, boiled beef meats and beef tongue, capon, served with "*mostarda*", a quince preserve with candied fruits and mustard, roasted turkeys with roasted potatoes and spinach, "*mostarda*" with "*ricotta*" (cottage cheese), preserved fresh grapes, tangerines, oranges, nuts and dried fruits and the classic "*mandorlato*", a sweet made of honey, whites of eggs and peeled almonds.

The "*Panettone*" started to be popular after 1950.

In Vicenza, the use was that the "*Befana*", an old ugly lady looking like a witch, coming through the chimney, filled children's socks. The socks had to be hanged on the chimney console the night before Epiphany, and during the night those socks were filled with sweets, candies, dried fruits and perhaps toys or only with black carbon for those who during the past year did not behaved correctly. But it wasn't so in other places in Veneto, like in Verona, where gifts to children were given, as at nowadays, by Saint Lucy, on 13 December.

Christmas is a day of peace and reconciliation. On this day people should not work because it brings evil. People who work on Christmas day, the popular tradition says, get swollen hands.

A real Christmas tree in the past appeared only in the upper classes houses.

As years went by many things changed.

At present instead of the *presepe* in almost all homes there's a Christmas ecological lighted tree, well decorated, as a symbol of Christmas holiday, by this time spread all over the eastern world.

Only in churches and in few homes, the *presepe* is prepared with the same care like once ago.

People are still very sensitive to this big festivity, but they don't pay visit anymore to authorities, friends or to next door neighbours like in the past.

Wishes are exchanged by cards, telephone calls, sms or e-mails.

In our towns during the Christmas holidays we have a lot a events: at many churches you can find concerts with holy music, choirs with Christmas songs and in some villages *living presepe* with local people who play as Mary, Joseph, the shepherds with sheep and so on, the event of the Holy Nativity.

"*Babbo Natale*", as we call Santa Klaus, has replaced the *Befana*, because she's forgotten many children's addresses. He isn't spiteful as she was indeed and never brings black carbon to anyone, but only rich toys for everyone.

The PRESEPE: In 1223 in Greccio, a small centre near Umbrian border, St Francis started to create the holy representation of Jesus's birth: it was the origin of the Italian presepe. From this moment on it became known in other parts of Italy.

Thanks to Giovanni da Capistrano the diffusion of the representation of Jesus and the holy family in natural dimensions became destination of daily and domestic devotion.

The presepe are made of wood, paper-mache, wax or earthenware.

Around Naples the presentations have often no direct association with evangelical themes; they're inspired by local culture and daily partenopean life.